

Chapter One: The Tablet of Secrets

Dr. Evelyn Carter knelt in the dimly lit chamber beneath Rome's Palatine Hill, her gloved hands trembling as they brushed away centuries of dust from the stone surface before her. The air was thick with the scent of earth and antiquity, the weight of history pressing upon her like an unseen force. She had spent the last five years scouring the ruins of ancient Rome, searching for something that many believed was merely a myth—a tablet inscribed with a secret that could change the course of history. And now, finally, she had found it.

The flickering glow of her lantern cast shifting shadows on the walls, illuminating intricate carvings that had not seen the light of day for millennia. Her heart pounded as she traced the Latin script engraved into the smooth, obsidian-like surface of the tablet. The lettering was old—far older than anything she had ever encountered in her career as an archaeologist.

She inhaled sharply, her breath catching in her throat as she read the inscription aloud:

“Via ad urbem perdidit, per indicia latere in umbra orbis terrarum.”

“The path to the lost city, through clues hidden in the shadows of the world,” she whispered in translation, her voice barely above a breath.

A shiver ran down her spine. Could this be it? The first true lead in the centuries-old legend of the lost city of Aurea Terra? Scholars had debated its existence for generations, dismissing it as little more than a fable. But Evelyn had never believed in mere fables—she believed in history waiting to be uncovered.

She hurriedly took out her journal, copying the inscription with meticulous care. Every detail mattered. If this truly led to Aurea Terra, she would need to follow each clue exactly.

Suddenly, a noise echoed down the corridor behind her. The sound of footsteps. Evelyn froze. She wasn't alone.

Her pulse quickened as she extinguished her lantern, plunging the chamber into darkness. The ruins were supposed to be deserted—only she and a handful of trusted colleagues knew about this dig. Whoever was coming wasn't supposed to be here.

She pressed herself against the cool stone wall, straining her ears. Voices murmured in hushed tones, too distant to make out the words, but the urgency in them was unmistakable.

Then, the beam of a flashlight swept across the chamber.

Evelyn's heart pounded. She had to move.

Clutching her journal to her chest, she reached for the tablet, hesitating only a moment before sliding it into her satchel. There was no time to wrap it properly—she would have to ensure its

safety later. Right now, she had to get out before whoever was searching the ruins found her first.

Moving swiftly but silently, she crept toward the narrow tunnel leading back to the surface. The voices grew louder, the flashlight beam bouncing against the walls as her unknown pursuers moved closer. She reached the base of a crumbling staircase and began ascending, each step taken with practiced caution. One wrong move, and the entire structure could collapse around her.

Just as she reached the top, a voice rang out from below.

“Stop! We know you’re up there.”

Evelyn didn’t hesitate. She bolted through the archway and into the open air, the cool Roman night washing over her. The streets were nearly empty at this hour, the city sleeping beneath a blanket of stars. She ducked into an alleyway, pressing herself against the ancient brick as she listened for pursuit.

Seconds passed. Then minutes.

Nothing.

She exhaled slowly, finally allowing herself a moment to breathe. The tablet was safe. And now, she had a path to follow.

Aurea Terra was waiting.

Evelyn sat across from Marco in a quiet café near Piazza Navona, the warm glow of lanterns flickering over the cobblestone streets outside. The aroma of freshly brewed espresso lingered in the air, mingling with the faint scent of rain on stone. Marco, her trusted colleague and one of the few people she could rely on, leaned forward, his dark brows furrowed as he studied the sketch of the tablet’s inscription in her journal.

“I still don’t understand how this is supposed to lead us anywhere,” he admitted, rubbing his chin. “The words are vague—‘shadows of the world’? That could mean anything.”

Evelyn smiled, tapping her pen against the journal. “That’s where history comes in, Marco. Ancient Romans often used metaphor in their inscriptions, especially when hiding something valuable. ‘Shadows’ could mean hidden places, things that aren’t obvious to the untrained eye.”

Marco crossed his arms. “And ‘the path to the lost city’?”

She turned the journal around so he could see her notes. “Look at the phrasing. It says ‘Via ad urbem perdidit’—literally, ‘the road to the lost city.’ But in Latin, ‘via’ can also mean a method or a way of thinking, not just a physical path. It suggests we need to follow a method of deciphering clues.”

Marco exhaled, shaking his head. “You’re saying the inscription itself is a riddle.”

“Exactly.” She flipped to another page, where she had drawn a crude map of the Roman Empire. “If we look at ancient Roman trade routes, we can find places that were considered ‘shadows of the world’—regions on the fringes of the empire, places where Rome’s influence was strong but not always well-documented. Places where secrets were buried.”

Marco leaned in, scanning the map. “So, where do we start?”

Evelyn tapped a specific point on the parchment. “Alexandria.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Egypt?”

“Yes. Alexandria was a center of knowledge, home to the Great Library. If someone in ancient Rome wanted to hide information but still have it accessible to the right people, that’s where they would place the first clue.”

Marco nodded slowly. “And what about the ‘shadows’ part?”

She flipped another page in her journal, revealing a sketch of an ancient sundial. “Roman sundials didn’t just tell time—they were used for astronomical calculations and sometimes even as coded messages. If the next clue is in Alexandria, I’d bet it’s hidden in something that relies on shadows.”

Marco rubbed his temples. “This is insane.”

Evelyn grinned. “This is history.”

A brief silence settled between them before Marco finally chuckled. “Alright, Professor Carter. When do we leave?”

Evelyn glanced at the clock on the café wall, then at her packed satchel beside her. “Our flight leaves at dawn.”

Marco exhaled, running a hand through his hair. “Of course it does.”

Evelyn raised her cup of espresso in a small toast. “To Alexandria and the secrets of the past.”

He clinked his cup against hers. “To not getting ourselves killed.”

With a smirk, Evelyn took a sip. The journey had only just begun.

The flight from Rome to Alexandria was uneventful, but the weight of their mission sat heavily on Evelyn’s mind as the plane descended into the bustling Egyptian city. Marco, ever the skeptic, remained uncharacteristically quiet beside her, his eyes darting to the clouds as if searching for something—perhaps a sign that their journey would not end in disaster.

Once they landed, the pair made their way through the busy streets of Alexandria, the air thick with the scent of spices and the hum of a city steeped in history. They passed by the grand remnants of the ancient city, the Pompey's Pillar standing tall against the sky, a symbol of the glory of Alexandria's Hellenistic era. The ancient library might have been destroyed, but the city still clung to its rich legacy of knowledge and learning.

Their destination was the Serapeum, an ancient temple complex dedicated to the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis, and rumored to house the remains of the Great Library of Alexandria's scrolls. While most of the library had been lost to the sands of time, it was believed that some of its secrets were hidden within the stone walls of the Serapeum.

As they approached the site, Evelyn's heart began to race. The ancient ruins were crumbling, but there was an undeniable sense of reverence in the air. The stone pillars seemed to whisper of forgotten knowledge, and Evelyn felt an overwhelming urge to connect with the past. This was the place where scholars had once gathered, exchanging ideas that had shaped the course of history. She was standing where some of the greatest minds in the ancient world had walked.

They entered the ruins through a narrow archway, the stones cool and smooth beneath their fingertips. The Serapeum, though damaged by time and human interference, still held an aura of grandeur. Massive statues of Serapis, each more imposing than the last, stood in a solemn circle around the entrance. The place was eerily silent, save for the occasional whisper of wind, as if the ruins themselves were waiting for Evelyn to uncover their secrets.

"Where do we even begin?" Marco asked, his voice breaking the silence.

Evelyn scanned the surroundings. There were no obvious clues, no inscriptions that could easily lead them to the next step in their quest. But she wasn't going to give up that easily.

She knelt near the base of a crumbling pillar, brushing away sand and debris. Her fingers brushed against something cold—a carving. The script was familiar, but the symbols were strange. It was a series of geometric shapes, almost like a code. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck rise as she realized what she had found.

"Marco," she called, her voice barely a whisper. "Look at this."

He joined her quickly, kneeling beside her. He examined the carvings, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"It's not Latin," he said after a moment. "This looks like an ancient cipher."

Evelyn nodded. "It is. This could be the next clue. These symbols... they seem to correspond with the Roman concept of *lux*—light. And more specifically, *lux divina*—the divine light that guided the souls of the righteous."

Marco raised an eyebrow. "So we're looking for light?"

“Not just light,” Evelyn corrected. “Divine light. A symbol of illumination. It could be a reference to the famous Pharos of Alexandria.”

The Pharos, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, had once stood on the Alexandria harbor, a towering lighthouse designed to guide sailors safely to shore. While it had been destroyed in an earthquake in the 14th century, its legacy lived on in the lore surrounding the city. For Evelyn, the mention of light was more than just a clue—it was a call to search for the lost knowledge hidden in Alexandria’s greatest monument.

She stood up, her eyes scanning the horizon. The lighthouse had once been a beacon visible from miles away, and in its shadow, secrets had been protected. She could only hope that one of them still remained.

“We need to get to the harbor,” Evelyn said, her voice filled with urgency. “The Pharos is our next destination.”

Marco didn’t hesitate. “Lead the way.”

The harbor was just a short distance from the Serapeum, but as they neared the water’s edge, the weight of the task ahead seemed to grow heavier. The ancient dockyards, now reduced to a jumble of stone and metal, whispered of a bygone era. Ships had once sailed into this harbor from every corner of the ancient world, bringing with them goods, ideas, and treasures.

Evelyn stood at the water’s edge, gazing out at the distant sea. “The Pharos was built to guide sailors,” she murmured. “But what if it also guided those seeking knowledge—hidden knowledge, like the secrets of Aurea Terra?”

Marco scanned the harbor, his eyes falling on an old stone column standing alone by the water. It wasn’t as large as the other ruins, but something about it caught his attention. He walked toward it, Evelyn following closely behind.

As they reached the column, Evelyn’s eyes were drawn to an inscription carved into its base. It was Latin, but the words were cryptic.

“Lux erunt sub aquis, procul a luce.”

“Light will be beneath the waters, far from the light,” she translated aloud. “This is it. The next clue. We need to search beneath the waters of the harbor.”

Marco looked at her skeptically. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No,” Evelyn replied firmly. “The tablet mentioned shadows and hidden places. This could be the literal interpretation. There’s something beneath the surface here, and we need to find it.”

They made their way to the nearest dock, where ancient stone steps led down into the water. The air was thick with the scent of salt, and the moonlight reflected off the water, casting eerie

shadows on the ruins. Evelyn could feel her heart racing again—something told her that the next clue was closer than they realized.

With determination in her eyes, she stepped into the water, Marco following closely behind. The coolness of the sea sent a shock through her system, but she didn't falter. They waded deeper, the water rising to their knees, then their waists. As they reached the deepest part of the harbor, Evelyn's fingers brushed against something solid beneath the surface.

A stone slab.

Evelyn's breath caught in her throat. She gestured for Marco to help her lift it, and together, they managed to shift the slab aside, revealing a narrow tunnel beneath the water.

"It's a hidden chamber," Evelyn whispered. "And I think it's time to see what it holds."

They entered the tunnel, the darkness swallowing them whole. With every step, Evelyn felt closer to uncovering the secrets of Aurea Terra. And in the heart of this ancient city, she knew they were one step closer to finding it.

The journey to Alesia had been long, and with each passing mile, Evelyn's sense of urgency deepened. The sun dipped low in the sky as they finally arrived at the site—an ancient Roman battleground, quiet and untouched, but its history alive with whispers. The remnants of fortifications still lingered, almost like the skeletal remains of a time long past. It was here, under the endless blue sky, where Julius Caesar had secured his most decisive victory, and Evelyn believed that beneath the layers of time, something vital was hidden.

The landscape was peaceful now, the hills rolling gently, with only the distant sound of birds and the rustling of leaves in the wind. But Evelyn knew the land held secrets, buried under centuries of history. Alesia was more than a battlefield; it was the epicenter of a turning point in the Roman conquest, a place where iron and fire had collided. Caesar's victory over Vercingetorix had not only secured the fate of the Gallic tribes but also solidified the might of the Roman Empire, bringing an unparalleled level of control to the Mediterranean world.

Yet, despite the calm of the present, Evelyn couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. There had been too many odd occurrences lately—too many fleeting glimpses of movement just beyond her line of sight, too many rustling sounds in the distance when no one was there. The tablets she and Marco had uncovered were more than cryptic messages—they were part of a larger, shadowy puzzle. And someone, or something, was out there, moving just beyond the edge of her perception, chasing the same ancient knowledge.

"Marco," Evelyn said in a low voice, glancing around cautiously. "We have to be careful. There's someone following us."

Marco, who had been busy unpacking their supplies, looked up sharply. "What do you mean? We've been out here for hours, and no one's approached us."

Evelyn shook her head, her eyes scanning the horizon. “It’s not about people coming up to us. I’ve been feeling it for days now—eyes on us, from afar. The same sensation I had back in Alexandria. We’re not alone in this.”

Marco furrowed his brow but didn’t argue. They both knew that when Evelyn sensed something was off, it was better to trust her instincts.

As they began exploring the site, Evelyn noticed something peculiar about the landscape. The hills, once thought to be mere remnants of ancient fortifications, seemed to form a perfect alignment, pointing directly toward the ancient city of Gergovia. Gergovia had been the site of one of Caesar’s earliest defeats in Gaul, where he faced Vercingetorix’s forces. Yet, its importance extended beyond the battlefield; it was a place that had witnessed the rise of the Gallic resistance.

For centuries, historians had debated whether there was more to Caesar’s conquest of Gaul than met the eye. The Romans had successfully annexed vast portions of Gaul, but something had troubled Caesar during the conquest—something he had kept hidden from the public eye. And it wasn’t just his military strategies that concerned him. There were rumors of secret alliances between the Gallic tribes and ancient societies that had long existed beneath the surface, societies with knowledge of the earth itself—knowledge that was rumored to be hidden beneath the land, connected to the mysteries of iron and fire.

As Evelyn moved carefully along the ancient earthworks, something caught her attention: a series of worn, but distinct, symbols etched into the stone walls—symbols that looked familiar. They were the same symbols from the tablet—the ones referring to “*Lumen ad ferrum*”—light to iron. The unmistakable design of an ancient Roman gladius was carved next to a depiction of fire, its flames seemingly rising from the iron blade. But beneath these symbols, there was something more—an engraving of a figure holding a map, its edges burnt and faded. The figure appeared to be wearing the distinctive armor of a Roman legionary.

“This is it,” Evelyn whispered, crouching down to get a closer look. “This is what I’ve been looking for. The light... the iron... and now, this.” She touched the carving of the map, tracing the lines with her fingers. The map depicted not just Alesia, but several other locations across Gaul. At the center of it was a large X—a marked spot, clearly significant. But the most surprising thing was the location near the mark: *Vercingetorix’s last stand*.

Evelyn’s heart raced. Was there something more to Caesar’s victory than history had told? Had the Gallic chieftain, Vercingetorix, not only fought for freedom but also for something greater—something buried beneath the earth, hidden by the very power of the Roman Empire? What if the “*iron*” was more than just weaponry? What if it was tied to the very foundations of Caesar’s conquest?

Marco leaned in, his voice quiet. “You’re onto something, aren’t you?”

Evelyn didn’t reply immediately. Her eyes were still fixed on the symbols, but her thoughts were elsewhere. She remembered another piece of the puzzle—the “shadows of the world.” A

shadow cast by something older, something that Caesar had intentionally buried beneath layers of history. If she was right, and these clues were leading to a hidden treasure or knowledge, it wouldn't just change the understanding of Rome's conquest—it could alter the very course of history itself.

Suddenly, the wind shifted. A faint, almost imperceptible rustling came from the nearby thicket. Evelyn's instincts flared. She stood up quickly, looking around. Someone was here—someone who had been following them, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Marco glanced up from the carving. "What is it?"

"Someone's here," Evelyn said, her voice tight with urgency. "We need to move, now."

They quickly gathered their things, scanning the horizon for any sign of movement. The air around them felt thick with tension, and Evelyn's heart pounded in her chest. She didn't know who was following them, or why, but one thing was clear: someone had already uncovered these secrets, and they would stop at nothing to find the hidden truths buried beneath Alesia.

As they made their way toward the wooded area at the edge of the site, Evelyn's mind raced. She had to be careful—if they were being hunted by someone who understood the significance of these symbols, they were playing a dangerous game. The connection between the ancient Roman history and these inscriptions was no coincidence. Whoever sought to stop them from uncovering the truth had their own dark motives, and the weight of history itself was on the line.

They had no time to waste. The deeper they ventured into the shadows of Alesia, the closer they came to uncovering a truth that could alter the course of history.

But would they be the ones to uncover it—or would someone else, lurking in the darkness, take it first?

The race was on.

The symbols Evelyn had found at Alesia haunted her thoughts. *Lumen ad ferrum—light to iron*. The markings hinted at something deeper than just Caesar's conquest; they hinted at knowledge buried beneath centuries of war, victory, and deception. And now, she was beginning to suspect that the lost city of *Aurra Terra*—a name she had only seen in fragmented Latin texts—was somehow woven into the very foundation of Rome's rise to power.

As she and Marco continued their search through the hills surrounding Alesia, Evelyn couldn't shake the feeling that history itself had been manipulated, its truths hidden within carefully crafted myths. The Romans had not only conquered the Gauls, but they had absorbed their knowledge, their legends, and perhaps even something far more valuable than land—something powerful enough to remain a secret for over two millennia.

She pulled out her notebook and flipped through her notes. *Aurra Terra*. The name had appeared in an obscure fragment attributed to Pliny the Elder, one of Rome's greatest historians. The passage was cryptic, almost as if it had been deliberately left incomplete:

*"Et fuit urbs aurum radiantem, terram abundantem, obscura nunc, latet sub umbris."
(And there was a city, radiant with gold, abundant with earth, now in darkness, hidden beneath the shadows.)*

A city abundant with earth? That phrase had stuck with her. The Romans often spoke in metaphors, and Evelyn suspected that "earth" didn't simply mean soil—it meant *power*. But power over what?

"Marco," she murmured, running a finger across the old Latin script. "Have you ever heard of Aurra Terra?"

Marco glanced up from his own notes, frowning. "Barely. It's one of those lost city myths—like Atlantis or Thule. Some scholars think it was just poetic imagery, a metaphor for Rome's expansion."

"But what if it wasn't just a metaphor?" Evelyn insisted. "What if it was real? And what if Rome's rise wasn't just about military conquest, but about something else—something they took from the Gauls?"

Marco hesitated before answering. "You think Aurra Terra existed in Gaul?"

Evelyn exhaled slowly. "Not just Gaul. It's connected to something bigger. Think about it. Julius Caesar didn't just conquer Gaul—he *systematically erased* certain parts of their history. And now, we're finding connections between ancient battle sites, hidden inscriptions, and a lost city mentioned in Latin texts."

She tapped the page. "This passage from Pliny? He wasn't the only one to mention it. There's a passage in the *Aeneid*—Vergil's epic—where Aeneas speaks of a 'hidden land, bathed in golden light, lost to time but never to fate.' Scholars always assumed it was a poetic device, but what if Vergil was hinting at something real? The Romans loved to disguise truth as myth."

Marco leaned in, his expression serious now. "You're saying that Aurra Terra wasn't just a myth, but a *real* place?"

Evelyn nodded. "And I think the Romans either found it... or buried it."

As they pored over the texts, another connection emerged—one that sent a shiver down Evelyn's spine.

The ancient Roman historian Tacitus had written of a mysterious battle—one that had been strangely omitted from Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (his accounts of the Gallic Wars). Tacitus claimed that there had been a battle *not recorded* in Caesar's own writings, one where

entire legions had disappeared, not because they were defeated, but because they had “entered the earth and never returned.”

The Romans had many myths, but they did not make a habit of recording stories of their own men vanishing into the ground. What if this was a veiled reference to something else?

Evelyn turned the page of another document—a lesser-known fragment from Suetonius, who had chronicled the lives of the Caesars. It was an obscure reference, but it held weight:

"Caesar invenit terram antiquam, sed inlustravit eam ferro."
(*Caesar found an ancient land, but illuminated it with iron.*)

Illuminated it with iron. The phrase echoed *Lumen ad ferrum*—light to iron.

Could it be that Caesar had found something ancient, something hidden beneath the lands he conquered? Had he used war as a cover to seize something far older than Rome itself?

As they sat beneath the shadow of Alesia, Evelyn and Marco tried to make sense of it all. The map carved into the stone at the battlefield had marked locations, and one of them stood out. It was not a Roman city. It was a place barely known outside of obscure historical texts: *Argentoratum*—modern-day Strasbourg.

But in ancient times, Argentoratum had been more than just a settlement—it had been a crossroads, a place where Celtic and Roman influences met. And, as Evelyn knew, it had a chilling connection to a lost Roman legion—the legendary *Legio IX Hispana*.

The Ninth Legion had marched north, deep into the lands of the Gauls and beyond. Then, they had vanished. Some believed they had been wiped out in battle. Others suspected something else—something that had never been written down.

And now, standing in the ruins of Alesia, Evelyn suspected she had found the answer. The lost city of Aurra Terra—if it had ever existed—was somewhere along that route. And the Ninth Legion? They may have found it first.

She looked up at Marco. “We have to go to Strasbourg.”

Marco exhaled. “You think the Ninth Legion disappeared because of *this*? A hidden city?”

Evelyn nodded. “And I think we’re not the only ones looking for it.”

As the sun set, casting the land into twilight, Evelyn’s instincts flared again. She turned sharply, scanning the ruins, her pulse quickening.

There. A silhouette. Half-hidden behind a collapsed stone wall.

Her breath caught.

They *were* being followed.

Whoever they were, they had been tracking her since Alexandria. And now, as Evelyn stared into the growing darkness, she realized that whoever was watching them knew exactly what they were looking for.

And they were not going to let her find it first.

The ancient stones of Alesia felt like they were closing in on Evelyn as she and Marco hastily gathered their materials. The eerie sensation of being watched had only grown stronger since their discovery of the Latin inscriptions.

"Whoever they are, they've been following us for days," Marco muttered as he slung his bag over his shoulder. "If we stay here much longer, we're handing them an opportunity."

Evelyn nodded, but her thoughts were elsewhere—on the inscriptions, on the map, and most of all, on the name that had been buried in history: *Aurra Terra*.

Their next destination was Argentoratum—Strasbourg. If the lost Ninth Legion had encountered something powerful enough to erase them from history, then perhaps their fate was written somewhere among the ruins.

As the train sped toward the French-German border, Evelyn traced her finger over the hastily copied Latin phrases from Alesia. The phrase *Lumen ad ferrum* had already led them to one hidden inscription. But something new had appeared on the stone slab:

"Ex umbris ad lucem, sed ferrum tenebit."
(*From the shadows to the light, but iron shall hold it.*)

It was another cryptic message, and Evelyn's gut told her that "iron" didn't just mean weapons. The Romans had used iron for many things—chains, gates, and, most importantly, locks.

"What if," she mused aloud, "these messages are not just describing Rome's conquests, but something they were trying to keep contained?"

Marco frowned. "You mean something they *found* and then buried?"

Evelyn nodded. "Every inscription we've found so far talks about *light and iron*. Either something was discovered and harnessed, or something was *sealed away*."

She flipped to another page in her notes. In Pliny's writings, she had found another obscure reference to *Aurra Terra*:

"Fulgur concidit et terram scindit, et post id urbs inter umbras latuit."
(*Lightning struck and split the earth, and after that, the city hid within the shadows.*)

Lightning. She had dismissed it before, thinking it was just another metaphor for divine wrath or destruction. But now, she wasn't so sure.

She opened her laptop and searched for natural disasters in ancient Roman history. One event stood out—an earthquake recorded by Tacitus in the year 17 AD that had devastated multiple cities in the province of Asia (modern-day Turkey). But another, lesser-known event was recorded in Gaul during the Gallic Wars—an unnatural storm, one that had been followed by the sudden collapse of a massive portion of land near what was now the Rhine River.

And just like that, the pieces started falling into place.

“The Ninth Legion wasn't just wiped out,” Evelyn said slowly. “They *disappeared*. And I think they disappeared *here*.”

Marco leaned forward. “You think Aurra Terra was near Argentoratum?”

“I think it was beneath it.”

By the time they arrived in Strasbourg, night had fallen, and the air had a sharp chill to it. The old city's streets were quiet, but Evelyn couldn't shake the feeling that someone—whoever had been following them—was still out there.

They checked into a small guesthouse near the city center, and Evelyn wasted no time poring over old maps.

Argentoratum had been a military settlement. The Romans had built a fortress here, strategically placing it along the Rhine. But Evelyn wasn't looking at the maps for the fortress—she was looking at what lay *beneath* it.

Roman aqueducts, abandoned tunnels, forgotten ruins—there was more hidden under Strasbourg than most people knew. But one location stood out:

A series of collapsed tunnels just outside the city, near an ancient battlefield where a Roman outpost once stood.

“Marco, look at this,” she said, pointing to an old excavation report. “The tunnels beneath this site caved in nearly two thousand years ago.”

“You think that's where the Ninth Legion went?”

Evelyn exhaled. “I think they were marching toward something. And whatever they found—it buried them.”

The next morning, they made their way to the site. It was an unassuming patch of forestland now, but history whispered beneath the surface. The remains of a Roman wall still stood, moss-covered and weathered by time.

Evelyn traced her fingers along the stones, feeling for any sign of an inscription. If the other sites had markings, this one would too.

Then, she found it.

Partially buried beneath the roots of an old oak tree, the edge of a carved stone protruded from the ground. Evelyn and Marco worked quickly, brushing away the dirt, revealing the Latin words hidden for centuries.

"Quod sub terra iacet, ferrum servabit. Aurum, lux, et umbra in unum sunt."
(*What lies beneath the earth, iron shall guard. Gold, light, and shadow are one.*)

Evelyn's pulse pounded.

Aurra Terra *was real*. And someone, long ago, had sealed it away.

But as the wind rustled the trees, she felt it again—that presence.

They weren't alone.

The hunt for Aurra Terra had just begun.

The chill in the air deepened as Evelyn ran her fingers over the inscription. The words *Quod sub terra iacet, ferrum servabit*—"What lies beneath the earth, iron shall guard"—echoed in her mind. The Romans had locked something away, something tied to the lost city of Aurra Terra.

Marco stood watch, his eyes scanning the tree line. "Whoever's following us is getting closer. We need to move."

Evelyn nodded, but she couldn't leave without understanding what this inscription truly meant. She dug into her notes, searching for references to iron as a form of protection in ancient Roman history.

Then it hit her.

Iron wasn't just a material for weapons or locks. In Roman mythology, Mars, the god of war, was deeply connected to iron, and the Romans believed that iron held mystical properties. Blacksmiths who forged weapons were said to harness divine power, and iron was often used to ward off evil.

But there was something else—something even older than Rome itself.

Evelyn flipped through her notes and found what she was looking for: the Battle of Veii, a war fought between the early Roman Republic and the powerful Etruscan city of Veii in 396 BC.

According to historical records, the Romans laid siege to Veii for ten years before finally breaking through. But legend claimed they won only after performing a secret ritual to invoke the gods of the enemy city and lure their favor away.

The phrase *evocatio deorum*—"the calling forth of the gods"—was a forbidden practice, meant to strip a city of its divine protection. It was said that after Rome conquered Veii, strange occurrences plagued the land. Some sources spoke of unnatural storms and earthquakes. Others whispered of an underground chamber that the Romans sealed—one that held something Veii's priests had been protecting for centuries.

Iron was placed around the chamber. And then, it was forgotten.

Evelyn's hands shook as she compared the Latin inscriptions.

The Romans used iron to guard something beneath Veii... just like they had done here in

Marco crouched beside her. "You think the Romans did the same thing here that they did in Veii?"

"Yes," Evelyn whispered. "Except this time, it wasn't just an enemy god they sealed away. It was an entire city."

She turned back to the inscription:

"Aurum, lux, et umbra in unum sunt."
(Gold, light, and shadow are one.)

She had seen these words before—on the first tablet they found in Alesia. Back then, she thought it was a poetic phrase, but now, it felt like a warning.

Gold. Light. Shadow.

Three elements, all bound together.

Marco rubbed his chin. "If the Romans were sealing something dangerous away, why mention gold?"

Evelyn frowned. In Roman mythology, gold was associated with the gods, divine power, and immortality. But it also had a darker side. Many myths spoke of cursed gold—like the legendary gold of Tolosa, stolen from a sacred temple and said to bring misfortune to whoever possessed it.

What if Aurra Terra wasn't just a city?

What if it was a place of power, one that the Romans had hidden away because it was too dangerous to control?

Their train back to the city was uneventful, but Evelyn couldn't shake the feeling that their pursuer was still close.

Back at the guesthouse, she spread her notes across the table, trying to piece everything together.

The iron-sealed chamber in Veii. The Ninth Legion's disappearance. The unnatural storms recorded by Roman historians.

Every clue pointed toward one thing—a cataclysmic event that the Romans had tried to erase from history.

She pulled out the Tabula Peutingeriana, an ancient Roman map known to depict the empire's extensive road network.

But this version was different.

It was a replica, but one made from a source older than the commonly accepted version. Evelyn had obtained it years ago while studying in Italy, but she had never found a reason to use it—until now.

Tracing her finger along the Rhine, she searched for any markings that could indicate something hidden.

Then, she saw it.

A faded, nearly imperceptible mark just north of Argentoratum. It was labeled in crude Latin:

"Umbra Terra."

Not Aurra Terra.

But Shadowed Land.

Marco leaned in. "That's it, isn't it?"

Evelyn's heart pounded. "Yes."

But before she could say another word, the lights in their room flickered—then died.

And outside, footsteps echoed in the hallway.

Whoever had been watching them had finally found them.

The darkness in their guesthouse room pressed in around them. Evelyn barely had time to register the flickering lights before the unmistakable sound of a door creaking open reached her ears.

Marco tensed beside her, his body shifting slightly as he reached for his bag. His gun was hidden inside, but if their pursuer was already in the hallway, using it might make things worse.

Evelyn grabbed the ancient Tabula Peutingeriana and the Latin inscriptions she had copied. If they had to run, she wouldn't leave behind the evidence they had fought to find.

Footsteps drew closer. Slow, deliberate. Whoever it was knew they were inside.

Marco's gaze flicked to the window. They were only on the second floor—an easy drop if they had to escape. Evelyn gave a small nod, and in an instant, Marco pulled her toward the window, silently unlocking it just as the door handle rattled.

The air was cold as Evelyn swung her legs over the ledge. Marco followed, landing in the alley below with a quiet thud. They sprinted through the dark streets of Strasbourg, weaving between alleyways until they reached a small bridge over the River Ill.

Panting, Evelyn leaned against the stone railing. "We can't keep running forever. We need to know who's after us."

Marco scanned their surroundings. "No doubt they're after the tablets. Maybe even the map."

Evelyn looked down at the faded markings on the Tabula Peutingeriana. The words *Umbra Terra* still stood out, a haunting reminder that they were chasing something lost to time.

But how did it all connect?

The Ninth Legion's disappearance.

The iron-sealed chamber at Veii.

The storm-ravaged ruins where the first tablet was found.

There had to be a pattern.

She took out her notebook and turned to the transcription of the latest tablet:

"Aurum, lux, et umbra in unum sunt." (Gold, light, and shadow are one.)

"Quod sub terra iacet, ferrum servabit." (What lies beneath the earth, iron shall guard.)

Iron. Shadow. Gold.

Evelyn's mind raced through Roman history, searching for another instance of these three elements appearing together.

Then, a chilling realization set in.

The Colossus of Nero.

The Colossus of Nero was one of the most infamous statues in Roman history. It once stood at the entrance of Emperor Nero's Domus Aurea—his lavish Golden House—and was said to have been over 30 meters tall.

Most scholars believed that after Nero's death, Emperor Vespasian repurposed the statue to resemble Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun. But Evelyn had always found something strange about that theory.

What if the transformation wasn't just about changing Nero's image?

What if it was about sealing something away?

The records stated that the Colossus was originally gilded in gold, reflecting the sun's divine light. But beneath the gold, it was made of iron—just like the sealed chamber at Veii.

And according to a nearly forgotten legend, Nero had once claimed that his power came from a shadow buried deep beneath Rome itself.

Evelyn's fingers tightened around the map.

What if Aurra Terra—or *Umbra Terra*—had been the true source of Nero's influence?

The emperor was obsessed with prophecy, omens, and divine power. If he had somehow found an ancient city that predated Rome itself, one steeped in forgotten magic, he would have sought to control it.

And when the Senate and the people of Rome turned against him, he would have done whatever was necessary to keep his secret buried.

Evelyn flipped through her notes on the Ninth Legion, the elite Roman force that vanished without explanation.

They were last recorded marching north from Eburacum (modern-day York, England) around 120 AD. Official records of their fate ceased to exist.

But according to some historical sources, the legion had been sent on a secret mission—one that had something to do with the forbidden territories beyond the Roman frontier.

A lost city.

A shadowed land.

A secret buried in iron.

And now, someone was hunting them to keep that secret buried.

Marco had been quiet, but now he straightened. "The Romans didn't just hide a city. They built over it."

Evelyn blinked. "What do you mean?"

He pointed toward the river. "We're in Strasbourg, right? The ancient Roman name for this city was Argentoratum. What if the Romans didn't just establish a military fort here? What if they built it to guard something underneath?"

Evelyn's breath caught in her throat.

She had studied Argentoratum's history before. The city had been a key military outpost of the Legio VIII Augusta, one of Rome's most powerful legions. But the fort's foundations had always been a mystery.

Historians had speculated that an older structure once stood beneath it—something erased from the records.

Could it have been part of Umbra Terra?

Evelyn hurriedly pulled out a flashlight and shined it over the Tabula Peutingeriana, tracing the paths around Argentoratum.

Then, she saw it.

An underground passage marked just beyond the city walls.

"Marco, I think I know where to go next."

They moved quickly, slipping through the streets of modern Strasbourg until they reached a small, unmarked courtyard near the old Roman ruins.

Evelyn checked the map again. "The entrance should be here."

Marco examined the stonework, running his fingers along the cracks. "If we're right, this has been hidden for centuries."

Evelyn hesitated. If they were about to uncover what Rome had buried, there was no telling what they would find inside.

Taking a deep breath, she pressed her hand against the stone.

It shifted.

A grinding noise echoed in the empty courtyard. Dust fell from the ancient masonry as a hidden doorway slowly revealed itself.

Evelyn shone her flashlight inside. A set of stone steps led downward into pure darkness.

Marco adjusted his grip on his gun. "We're not alone, are we?"

Evelyn shook her head. “No. And whoever’s following us... they know exactly what we’re about to find.”

With that, they stepped into the abyss, descending into the hidden depths of Argentoratum—toward the secrets Rome had tried to erase.

The stone steps spiraled downward, swallowed by a darkness that felt ancient, almost alive. Evelyn’s flashlight beam flickered against damp walls, revealing faint etchings—Latin inscriptions worn by time. Marco followed close behind, his every step careful, his grip firm on his gun.

As they descended deeper into the unknown, Evelyn couldn’t shake the feeling that they were walking straight into a forgotten chapter of history.

The air thickened with dust and the scent of damp earth. Then, at last, the steps leveled out into a long, vaulted corridor. The walls were reinforced with iron plates—a method rare in Roman construction.

Evelyn’s pulse quickened. Iron to seal something away.

She swept her flashlight across the passage, illuminating relief carvings of armored figures—Roman soldiers—locked in battle against shadowy, faceless entities. The artistry was crude, but the message was clear.

“Evelyn,” Marco called. His voice was tight.

She turned toward where he stood. At the end of the corridor, a massive iron door loomed, its surface engraved with Latin script.

She stepped closer, her fingers tracing the words:

"Ad lucem, ferrum nos protegat."
(*To the light, iron shall protect us.*)

Marco exhaled. “This was meant to keep something inside.”

Evelyn nodded. “And we’re about to open it.”

The door was impossibly heavy, but with effort, they managed to shift it just enough to slip through. Beyond it lay a chamber unlike anything Evelyn had ever seen.

A vaulted ceiling arched high above, lined with blackened iron beams. Torches—still standing where they had been left centuries ago—dotted the walls. But it was what lay in the center of the room that took her breath away.

A marble pedestal stood under a collapsed section of the ceiling. Scattered across it were fragments of ancient scrolls, their edges charred as if someone had tried to burn them long ago. The remnants of Roman wax tablets lay shattered nearby, their inscriptions barely visible.

Evelyn picked up one of the surviving fragments. The faded Latin writing made her breath hitch.

*"Neronis voluntas, in umbra occulta est."
(The will of Nero is hidden in the shadow.)*

Her mind raced. The Colossus of Nero. The shadowed land. Aurra Terra.

"What the hell did Nero know?" Marco muttered, scanning the ruins.

Evelyn tried to piece it together. The Golden House had been Rome's most extravagant palace, built after the Great Fire of 64 AD. But Nero had been obsessed with more than just wealth—he had sought divine power.

She remembered an obscure text she had read years ago—one that spoke of Nero consulting forbidden oracles, seeking the location of a lost city that predated Rome.

Was Aurra Terra his secret?

Before Evelyn could say anything, a gust of air rushed through the chamber.

Then, a sound.

A whisper.

Her flashlight flickered.

Marco stiffened, raising his gun. "Did you hear that?"

Evelyn nodded, scanning the darkness beyond the pedestal. The whisper was soft, unintelligible, like voices echoing from another time.

Then she saw it.

Along the far wall, a second iron door, its surface covered in ritualistic markings. But this time, the Latin was different.

Older.

Pre-Roman.

Evelyn's breath caught in her throat. The writing was in Etruscan—the language of the civilization that ruled Italy before Rome. The people Rome absorbed, erased, and built over.

She knelt, brushing away dust from the inscription. The words sent a chill through her body.

*"Qui aperit ianuam, umbram liberabit."
(He who opens this door shall release the shadow.)*

Marco took a step back. "Evelyn... maybe we don't want to open that one."

She swallowed hard. Was this what the Romans were trying to bury?

Not just a city... but something inside it?

A deep, metallic groan echoed behind them.

Evelyn spun around.

The iron door they had entered through was closing.

Someone was sealing them inside.

The iron door groaned as it sealed shut, trapping them in the ancient vault.

Evelyn lunged forward, pressing her hands against the cold metal. "No, no, no—"

Marco spun, gun raised, scanning the shadows. "We're not alone."

Evelyn's heart pounded. She swallowed hard and forced herself to think. Whoever had shut the door on them hadn't killed them outright. That meant one thing—they were being cornered.

A sharp click echoed through the chamber. A gun being cocked.

Evelyn grabbed Marco's arm, yanking him down just as a bullet ricocheted off the iron door behind them. The shot rang through the chamber, stirring the dust of centuries past.

Marco grunted in pain as he hit the ground.

Evelyn's stomach twisted when she saw blood seeping through the fabric of his sleeve.

"Marco!"

"I'm fine," he hissed through clenched teeth, pressing his other hand to the wound. "Just grazed. Keep moving."

Evelyn reached for her flashlight and turned it toward the far end of the chamber. Shadows danced across the iron-reinforced walls, and for a moment, she swore she saw a figure slip between the stone pillars.

Then—silence.

Whoever had fired at them was gone.

Marco exhaled through his nose, his face tight with pain. "Who the hell was that?"

"No idea," Evelyn muttered. "But they wanted us down here."

She turned her attention back to the room, scanning for another way out. The iron door was shut tight, but there was still the Etruscan-marked doorway at the far end.

Marco followed her gaze and groaned. "You're not seriously thinking about opening that, are you?"

"We don't have a choice," she said, already stepping forward.

The inscription on the ancient doorway sent a chill down Evelyn's spine.

"Qui aperit ianuam, umbram liberabit."
(He who opens this door shall release the shadow.)

She hesitated, running her fingers over the etchings. Etruscan script mixed with early Latin. That was rare. Romans had wiped out most of the Etruscan language, yet this survived. Why?

She inhaled sharply. "Marco... I think this was sealed before the Romans even got here."

Marco, still gripping his bleeding arm, gave her a look. "So what you're saying is, this thing is so bad even the Romans didn't want to mess with it?"

"Pretty much."

Marco sighed. "Of course."

With careful hands, Evelyn pressed against the door, feeling for a mechanism. The stone felt smooth and cold, but something about it felt... different.

Then she saw it—a thin groove near the center of the door.

A locking mechanism.

"Help me push," she said.

Marco groaned but placed his good hand against the stone. Together, they shoved.

The door resisted at first, as if reluctant to give up its secrets. Then—a deep, shuddering crack split the silence as the stone groaned open.

A gust of stale air rushed past them.

And beyond the door... lay a hidden chamber.

Torches lined the walls, their flames long extinguished. But what caught Evelyn's attention was the massive marble table in the center of the room.

Laid across it was a map.

But not just any map—this one was carved into solid gold.

Evelyn's breath caught. The engraving showed a detailed depiction of the Roman Empire—its borders stretching from Britannia to the sands of Egypt. But there was something else.

A place.

A city that shouldn't exist.

Marco limped forward, wiping sweat from his brow. "Tell me that says what I think it does."

Evelyn swallowed. She traced the Latin inscription beneath the unknown city.

*"Aurra Terra—urbs umbrarum."
(Aurra Terra—the city of shadows.)*

Her fingers trembled. This was it.

All the myths, the hidden connections, the lost Latin inscriptions—it had all led to this.

Aurra Terra. The mythical city that predated Rome itself.

Marco let out a low whistle. "So it's real."

"More than real," Evelyn murmured. She scanned the map, noting the geographical markers. The city was far from Rome—hidden deep in the Alps, past where any known Roman settlements had existed.

Suddenly, she noticed something else on the map.

Blood drained from her face.

Etched in the gold, surrounding Aurra Terra, were symbols. But not Roman. Not even Etruscan.

They were older.

Symbols that looked almost cuneiform.

Marco saw her reaction. "Evelyn... what is it?"

She turned to him slowly.

"If this is right..." she whispered. "Aurra Terra isn't just a lost Roman city."

Marco raised an eyebrow. "Then what is it?"

Evelyn stared at the ancient markings and swallowed hard.

"It's something that shouldn't exist at all."

A sharp clang rang out behind them.

Marco spun, gun raised.

The iron door they had pushed open?

It was closing.

And from the darkness beyond it... footsteps approached.

The heavy iron door slammed shut behind them, sealing them in the chamber.

Evelyn's pulse pounded in her ears. She grabbed Marco's arm, steadying him as he swayed slightly. Blood still seeped through his sleeve, but his grip on his gun remained steady.

"Whoever's out there," he muttered, "doesn't want us leaving."

Evelyn turned back to the golden map, her fingers tracing the ancient symbols surrounding *Aurra Terra*. The non-Roman script was unnerving. If these markings were cuneiform—or something even older—then the Romans hadn't built this city.

They had found it.

And then, they erased it from history.

She reached into her bag, pulling out her notebook and carefully sketching the unfamiliar symbols. "We need to figure out what this means," she whispered.

Marco exhaled sharply. "Yeah, preferably before whoever's trying to kill us gets in here."

Evelyn's eyes scanned the Latin inscriptions beneath the map. They were written in an imperial script—high Latin, reserved for decrees and oaths.

Her breath caught.

"Per iuramentum meum, Aurra Terra deleatur. Perdere testimonia. Nihil relinquitur."
(By my oath, Aurra Terra shall be destroyed. Erase the records. Leave nothing behind.)

She shuddered. "Marco... this was a direct order."

He frowned. "From who?"

Evelyn swallowed hard. “The Emperor himself.”

She pointed at the signature below the oath. It was faint, but unmistakable.

Hadrian.

Marco let out a low whistle. “Hadrian—the guy who built Hadrian’s Wall? That Hadrian?”

“The same.”

Evelyn’s mind raced. Emperor Hadrian had ruled from 117 to 138 AD, known for strengthening Rome’s borders and consolidating power. He had constructed walls, rebuilt the Pantheon, and commissioned vast architectural projects across the empire. But why would he order an entire city to be erased?

Marco glanced at the map again. “If Hadrian wanted it destroyed, that means it existed in his time.” He rubbed his jaw. “You think he found something there?”

Evelyn nodded slowly. “Not just found. Feared.”

She flipped to another inscription on the table, this one more weathered than the others. The Latin was rougher—almost hurried, as if written by someone in distress.

“Legio IX Hispana ingressa est. Nullus exiit.”
(*The Ninth Legion entered. None returned.*)

Evelyn’s blood ran cold.

“The Ninth Legion,” she breathed.

Marco frowned. “Wait—I’ve heard of them. One of Rome’s elite legions, right?”

“Yes.” Evelyn’s hands trembled as she read the words again. “The *Legio IX Hispana* was one of Rome’s most powerful military forces, veterans of countless wars. And then, sometime after Hadrian’s reign... they vanished.”

Marco’s eyes darkened. “You’re saying the Ninth Legion went into Aurra Terra and never came out?”

Evelyn nodded. “It’s one of history’s greatest mysteries. Historians debate whether they were wiped out in Britain, disbanded quietly, or sent on a doomed expedition.” She looked at the inscription. “But this says they marched into Aurra Terra... and were never seen again.”

Marco ran a hand through his hair. “So Hadrian didn’t just want the city erased—he wanted to cover up what happened to an entire legion.”

Evelyn swallowed hard. “And whatever happened to them... was something Rome never wanted anyone to know.”

A low rumble echoed through the chamber.

Both of them stiffened.

Then—stone shifted beneath their feet.

Evelyn barely had time to react before the floor cracked open.

With a gasp, she grabbed onto the edge of the map table as the ground beneath them caved inward.

Marco wasn't as lucky.

“Marco!” Evelyn lunged forward as he slid toward the darkness below. He caught himself on a jagged piece of stone, his wounded arm trembling under the strain.

“Eve—” he gritted his teeth.

She scrambled toward him, grasping his wrist. Too late.

The stone gave way, and Marco fell.

Evelyn barely had time to scream before the weight of the golden map tipped over, dragging her down into the abyss with him.

The last thing she saw before they hit the darkness was the inscription on the wall, glowing faintly under the flickering torchlight:

“Aurra Terra non dormit. Aspicit.”
(*Aurra Terra does not sleep. It watches.*)

Darkness swallowed them whole.

The rush of air tore at Evelyn's clothes as she plummeted downward, her stomach lurching in freefall. She barely had time to register the sensation before crashing into something hard and wet. The impact forced the breath from her lungs. Water.

The moment she hit, she kicked frantically, struggling against the unseen depths. Cold, ancient water pulled at her limbs, and the weight of her bag dragged her down. For a terrifying moment, she didn't know which way was up.

Then—a hand seized her wrist.

Marco.

He yanked her upward, both of them breaking the surface with a gasp. Evelyn coughed, shoving her hair from her eyes, blinking in the dim, golden glow that surrounded them.

They weren't alone.

Evelyn treaded water, looking around. The chamber was enormous. The walls—if they could even be called that—were carved from volcanic rock, smooth and lined with massive, faded murals. The paintings, illuminated by an eerie phosphorescence, depicted scenes from Roman history, but... something was wrong.

Marco spit out water. "Tell me we didn't just fall into some kind of underground temple."

Evelyn's chest tightened. "Not just a temple." She turned in the water, eyes widening.

Before them, half-submerged beneath the cavern's shadowed roof, stood the ruins of a city.

Ancient stone pillars jutted out of the water like skeletal remains of a forgotten civilization. Crumbled archways and marble steps, some still bearing remnants of Latin inscriptions, hinted at a grand past long buried beneath Rome itself.

Her voice was barely a whisper. "Marco... this is *Aurra Terra*."

His expression turned grim. "Then we're not supposed to be here."

Evelyn's heart pounded. This place—it had been erased from history, buried beneath Rome's foundations. And yet, it still stood. The walls, the structures... they were older than Rome itself.

Hadrian had hidden this place for a reason.

They swam toward the nearest stone ledge, heaving themselves onto the cold surface. Evelyn shivered, dripping water as she caught her breath. Marco flexed his injured arm with a wince.

"We need to find a way out," he muttered.

Evelyn was barely listening. Her eyes locked onto another Latin inscription carved into the stone steps leading up from the water. The words were nearly worn away, but as she traced them with her fingers, a chill ran down her spine.

*"Aurra Terra, ultima domus Legio IX Hispana."
(Aurra Terra, the final home of the Ninth Legion.)*

Marco read over her shoulder. "So it's true... they all ended up here."

Evelyn's mind raced. The entire Ninth Legion had vanished, and Rome had silenced all record of their fate. Had they been trapped here? Killed? Or worse—had they willingly stayed?

Her breath hitched as her gaze traveled to the mural on the cavern wall. Unlike the Roman frescoes above, this painting was different.

It depicted men in Roman armor standing before a figure... but the figure was not human.

Evelyn grabbed her flashlight, sweeping the beam over the mural.

At first glance, the figures were Roman—legionaries, their crested helmets and segmented armor unmistakable. But their faces...

She swallowed hard.

Their faces had been scratched away.

"Evelyn." Marco's voice was tense. He had stepped back, staring at the Latin scrawled hastily in red pigment below the mural. The words weren't carved into the stone like the others. They were painted—almost like a warning left in desperation.

*"Si ingressus es, fuge."
(If you have entered, flee.)*

Evelyn stared. "Someone left this for anyone who came after them."

Marco ran a hand down his face. "Yeah, and it doesn't exactly scream *Welcome to Rome*."

Evelyn turned back to the mural. The figure standing before the legion wasn't Roman. It was tall, draped in shadow, with hollow eyes that glowed faintly in the painting's faded colors. It looked almost—unnatural.

Something in her gut twisted. "Whatever happened here... it wasn't just a military failure." She exhaled sharply. "The Ninth Legion didn't just disappear. Something took them."

Marco frowned. "Took them?"

She gestured to the mural. "Look at the way they're standing. They're not fighting this thing. They're..." Her throat tightened. "They're kneeling."

Silence hung between them.

Marco let out a low breath. "You're saying the Ninth Legion didn't just vanish." He turned to her. "They stayed."

A distant sound echoed through the cavern.

Both of them froze.

It was faint, almost imperceptible—a low, rhythmic clanking, like the sound of metal shifting against stone.

Evelyn's stomach dropped.

"We're not alone," Marco muttered.

Evelyn slowly turned off her flashlight. "We need to move. Now."

They crept forward, keeping to the shadows, navigating the crumbling ruins. Ancient pillars stood like silent sentinels, their tops disappearing into the cavern's vaulted ceiling. The eerie glow from the walls barely provided enough light to see, but it was just enough for Evelyn to make out a set of stairs leading deeper into the ruins.

Marco exhaled sharply. "You sure about this?"

"No." But she moved forward anyway.

Something shifted in the darkness behind them.

Marco tensed, his fingers tightening around his weapon. Evelyn felt a shiver crawl up her spine. It wasn't just the sound.

It was the feeling.

A weight in the air. A presence.

She didn't dare turn around.

Aurra Terra does not sleep. It watches.

The words from the previous chamber rang in her mind as they hurried down the steps, each footfall echoing through the silent ruins.

They needed answers.

And more importantly—

They needed to get out before history repeated itself.

The oppressive silence of Aurra Terra seemed to close in around them as Evelyn and Marco descended the stone steps. The air was damp, thick with the scent of old earth and stagnant water. Each footstep echoed against the cavern walls, magnifying their presence in the lost city.

Evelyn's heartbeat was steady but quick. Her mind reeled with what they had just seen—the mural, the missing faces, the Latin warning scrawled in desperation. She had studied Roman history for years, but nothing had prepared her for this.

She kept her voice low. "If the Ninth Legion really stayed here... we need to understand why."

Marco scoffed under his breath. "I'm more interested in why no one left."

Evelyn shot him a look, but he had a point. It didn't make sense. If the Ninth had found shelter here after vanishing from history, why were there no records of any survivors?

Her fingers brushed against the damp stone wall as they moved deeper into the ruins. More Latin inscriptions lined the corridor, some carved with precision, others rushed, almost frantic. She traced the closest one with her fingertips, whispering the words aloud.

*"Non relinquimus. Non relinquunt."
(We do not leave. They do not let us.)*

Marco exhaled. "Yeah, that's comforting."

A distant clang echoed behind them.

Both of them stiffened.

The noise was distinct—metal scraping against stone, like armor shifting.

Marco immediately reached for his sidearm, his knuckles white against the grip. "Tell me that was just a rock falling."

Evelyn didn't answer. Because she knew it wasn't.

They pressed forward, winding through the ruins, past toppled pillars and shattered mosaics. The eerie glow from the phosphorescent walls was their only source of light, casting long, twisting shadows across the ancient stone.

Then, they stepped into a vast chamber.

Rows of tall, rectangular slabs stood in perfect alignment, stretching into the darkness. Each stone was engraved with Latin names, worn by time but still legible.

A graveyard.

Evelyn swallowed. "Marco... these are all Roman names."

He ran a hand over one of the slabs, reading aloud. "*Titus Flavius. Gaius Marcellus. Aulus Sabinus.*" He frowned. "These aren't just legionaries. Some of these were senators."

Evelyn's pulse quickened. "Hadrian didn't just erase the Ninth Legion." Her voice was hushed. "He erased everyone who knew about Aurra Terra."

Marco's expression darkened. "You're saying this wasn't just a lost city—it was a buried secret?"

Evelyn's gaze flicked over the endless rows of names. Some were chiseled in deep, strong strokes—official engravings. Others were scratched in hurried desperation. She stepped closer to a slab at the far end of the chamber.

*"In tenebris sumus. Non solum."
(We are in the darkness. We are not alone.)*

Her stomach turned.

Something moved behind them.

A faint whisper of air. A shifting of stone on stone.

Marco turned sharply, his injured arm pressing against his chest as he raised his weapon. His breath was steady, controlled. But Evelyn could see the tension in his stance.

They weren't alone.

The chamber was deathly silent.

Evelyn strained her ears, listening. The air felt thicker, heavier. It wasn't paranoia—something was watching them.

Then—a flicker of movement.

Evelyn barely had time to react before a shadow darted between the stone slabs.

Marco took a step back, angling himself between her and whatever was in the darkness. His voice was low, firm. "Evelyn."

She gritted her teeth, forcing herself to remain calm. The logical part of her brain tried to rationalize what she had just seen—an animal, an illusion, a trick of the dim light.

But deep down, she knew better.

Another metallic scrape cut through the silence.

Evelyn tightened her grip on her flashlight. "If that's a Roman soldier, we have bigger problems."

Marco didn't answer. His jaw was tight, his muscles coiled. He wasn't about to take chances.

They started moving again—slow, deliberate steps, staying close to the stone slabs. Evelyn's pulse pounded in her ears. Every instinct screamed at her to run, but she knew better than to rush blindly into the unknown.

Then—a whisper.

Not from Marco. Not from her.

From the darkness itself.

A breath. A hushed, unintelligible Latin phrase echoing from beyond the grave.

Marco snapped his weapon up. "Who's there?"

Silence.

Then, the faintest reply—a single Latin word, spoken from the abyss.

"Custodes."

Evelyn froze.

She knew that word. "Guardians."

Evelyn's mind raced. If the Ninth Legion had remained in Aurra Terra, if they had been trapped here, what if...

What if they had never died?

Her blood ran cold. "Marco."

His gaze didn't leave the shadows. "Yeah?"

She swallowed. "What if Hadrian didn't erase them from history because they vanished?" Her breath was shaky. "What if they were still here?"

His jaw clenched. He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

The darkness shifted again. The whispering grew louder, closer.

And then—the sound of metal boots against stone.

Not just one pair.

Many.

Evelyn's fingers dug into Marco's sleeve. "Run."

They sprinted.

The whispers followed.

The relentless sound of metallic boots against stone echoed through the ruined city as Evelyn and Marco sprinted through the cavernous halls of Aurra Terra. The whispers had stopped, but the rhythmic clank-clank of unseen figures closing in did not.

Evelyn's chest burned with exertion, but her mind raced even faster. These noises—this presence—was not human.

They turned a sharp corner and skidded to a halt.

The path ahead was blocked.

Towering bronze and iron figures stood in rigid formation, their hollow eyes gazing forward. Some bore the crested helmets of Roman centurions, others the segmented armor of a legionary. Their bodies were intricately forged, joints of iron plates interlocking like clockwork. The craftsmanship was impossibly advanced—not primitive, not crude, but deliberate. Precise.

Marco swore under his breath, gripping his injured side. "What in the hell are those?"

Evelyn, panting, turned and pressed her hands against the rough stone wall, searching for any clue. And then—she saw it.

An inscription.

Deep, jagged carvings in Latin.

Her breath hitched as she read it aloud, her voice hushed in reverence:

"Nos ferrum animavimus. Scientia nostra ultra saecula pervenit. Timuerunt. Secluserunt nos hic."

(We gave life to iron. Our knowledge surpassed the ages. They feared us. They sealed us here.)

Evelyn's eyes widened. "Oh my god..."

Marco shifted uncomfortably. "You wanna translate that in a way that doesn't make me feel like I'm in a horror movie?"

She turned to face him, the weight of revelation in her expression. "The Romans weren't just experimenting with iron. They were animating it."

Marco's brow furrowed. "What, like automatons?"

She nodded, her pulse racing. "Yes. The people of Aurra Terra— they weren't just another lost Roman settlement. They were inventors. Engineers. They created something beyond their time."

She turned back to the inscription, running her fingers over the ancient letters. "The other Roman leaders must have been terrified of what they had done. So they buried them. Buried the entire city."

Marco exhaled sharply. "You're telling me that the Roman Empire was sitting on a hidden technological revolution, and they just—what? Decided it was too dangerous and erased it?"

Evelyn nodded. "It makes sense. If the world had known... if these advancements had spread beyond Aurra Terra, history itself might have changed."

She gestured to the iron statues lining the halls. "And these—these aren't enemies. They're relics. Guards left behind."

Marco stared at the unmoving figures, then at the dimly lit corridor behind them where the metallic boots still echoed.

His grip on his weapon loosened. "So those footsteps we heard—"

"—weren't people," Evelyn finished.

A moment of tense silence passed between them. Then—the sound grew closer.

From the far end of the hall, shadows twisted and elongated. The rhythmic clanking of boots against stone reverberated once more—slow, steady, marching.

And then—they saw them.

More figures of iron and bronze, moving through the darkness. Their plated joints creaked, their heavy boots slammed in unison, their blank iron faces locked forward.

Marco's jaw tightened. Instinct told him to run.

But Evelyn didn't move.

She squared her shoulders, watching the iron legion as they emerged from the shadows. Their presence was not hostile—just relentless, unwavering.

She took a slow breath. "They're not chasing us."

Marco frowned. "Could've fooled me."

Evelyn stepped forward carefully, extending a hand toward the nearest automaton. Its surface was cool, smooth, perfectly engineered.

And then, as if responding to her presence, the iron soldier stopped.

The others followed, halting in perfect synchronization.

The hall was silent.

Evelyn exhaled. "They're programmed. They only move to push people back. To keep them away from something."

Marco eyed the statues warily. “So what happens if we keep going?”

Evelyn glanced down the corridor beyond them—the one place the automatons hadn’t blocked.

She met Marco’s gaze. “Then we find out what they were guarding.”

The heavy silence pressed in on them as they took their first cautious steps beyond the ranks of iron soldiers. None of the automatons moved to stop them.

Marco, still gripping his injured side, kept glancing back over his shoulder. “This is insane, you know that?”

Evelyn let out a breathless chuckle. “You were fine with buried treasure and a lost city, but this is where you draw the line?”

Marco shook his head, suppressing a grin. “No, this is just—” He gestured vaguely at the unmoving iron figures. “—a bit out of my expertise.”

Evelyn smirked. “Then let’s expand your knowledge.”

They pressed forward, deeper into the ruins. The corridor narrowed, then opened into a massive underground chamber.

At the center stood a monolithic structure, its surface lined with ancient mechanisms, gears, and inscriptions. A vast bronze door, sealed shut for centuries.

Evelyn’s breath caught.

Marco let out a low whistle. “Now that... is a vault.”

She stepped forward, tracing the engravings with trembling fingers. The Latin inscription here was different—more elaborate, but its meaning was clear.

“Ad custodiam scientiae quae mundum mutavisset. Clavis est sapientia.”
(To guard the knowledge that would have changed the world. The key is wisdom.)

She turned to Marco, excitement and fear warring in her expression.

“We just found the heart of Aurra Terra.”

Marco’s grip tightened around his weapon. “And if the Romans sealed this place away?”

Evelyn’s pulse pounded. “Then whatever is inside... was never meant to be found.”

The massive bronze door loomed before them, its engravings whispering secrets of a past that had been deliberately erased. Evelyn’s fingers traced the Latin inscription, her mind racing to connect everything they had uncovered.

"To guard the knowledge that would have changed the world. The key is wisdom."

She turned to Marco, heart pounding. "This... this isn't just some vault. It's the final piece of everything we've been chasing."

Marco, still clutching his injured side, exhaled. "Okay, let's back up for a second. We have an entire lost city, Roman automatons, and a vault full of buried knowledge. And apparently, every clue we've found led us here." He nodded toward the engravings. "Explain it to me, professor."

Evelyn took a deep breath, piecing the puzzle together out loud.

"The Iron Age was the turning point for Rome. Before it, they were just another rising civilization. But with iron tools, weapons, and infrastructure, they became the dominant force of the ancient world."

She gestured around them. "Aurra Terra wasn't just another settlement—it was a research hub. A place where Rome's most advanced thinkers weren't just experimenting with iron, but with mechanized engineering."

Marco frowned. "But we never heard about any of this."

"Because they erased it." Evelyn's voice was firm. "The Romans used iron to build an empire, but the people of Aurra Terra took it a step further. They figured out how to make autonomous machines—automatons. Iron soldiers, moving gears, complex locks... This wasn't supposed to exist back then."

Marco stared at the still, towering statues behind them.

"They created technology that Rome wasn't ready for." Evelyn's voice dropped. "So the Empire wiped them out."

She motioned to the ancient carvings they had discovered on their journey. "Everything we've found—the inscriptions, the scattered tablets, the hidden passages—all pointed to this. The Romans didn't just conquer their enemies. They conquered ideas. They saw the potential

Marco let out a low whistle. "So all those little hints we picked up... they weren't just random history lessons."

Evelyn nodded. "Exactly."

She started listing off their discoveries, her voice gaining momentum, "The first tablet they found mentioned a lost legion—a group that vanished without a trace. But now they knew: they weren't lost. They were silenced. The second tablet referenced Hephaestus, the god of metalwork and invention, but it was strange that it appeared in a Roman setting. Because Aurra Terra was more advanced than the Romans admitted. The third inscription warned of a city sealed in iron, where knowledge was both a gift and a curse. It wasn't just poetic language—it

was literal. Even the symbols on the automatons' armor matched early Roman designs—but subtly altered. These weren't just machines. They were prototypes. The first attempt at mechanized soldiers."

Marco exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "We weren't just following a treasure hunt. We were following a cover-up."

Evelyn's eyes flicked back to the massive vault. "And we're about to uncover it."

Then, from behind them—a noise.

Not the slow, rhythmic clanking of the iron statues.

Something softer. Quieter. Human.

Marco stiffened. "We're not alone."

Evelyn turned, pulse spiking. She saw it then—shadows moving beyond the statues. Dark figures weaving between the iron guardians.

"They found us." Marco's voice was tight.

Evelyn cursed under her breath. The people who had been following them since the beginning—who had attacked them, intercepted their paths, tried to scare them away—they were here.

And they weren't going to let them leave.

Marco adjusted his grip on his side. "We need to move. Now."

Evelyn's gaze snapped back to the vault.

"The answer is inside," she whispered.

Marco nodded grimly. "Then we better open it fast."

The shadows closed in. The metal statues stood silent and unmoving.

And the lost knowledge of Aurra Terra waited behind the door.

CHAPTER TWO

Evelyn's breath came in quick, shallow bursts as she stared at the sealed bronze vault. The ancient inscription still glowed faintly in the phosphorescent light:

Ad custodiam scientiae quae mundum mutavisset. Clavis est sapientia.
(To guard the knowledge that would have changed the world. The key is wisdom.)

Behind them, the shadows closed in—dark figures slipping between the silent iron guardians. She didn't know how many there were. She only knew they were out of time.

Marco pressed his palm against the vault door, grimacing as pain shot up his injured arm. "We can't brute-force this. There's got to be a mechanism."

Evelyn nodded, her mind racing. The key is wisdom. The phrase nagged at her, as if some clue was hovering just beyond her reach. She turned in a slow circle, studying the engravings around the threshold. Each panel was etched with intricate scenes: armies clashing, cities burning, men kneeling before towering figures.

Her pulse jumped. These weren't just any scenes. She recognized them—stories from Rome's oldest myths.

Romulus and Remus suckling at the she-wolf.

Aeneas carrying Anchises from burning Troy.

Vulcan—Hephaestus to the Greeks—hammering weapons in his forge.

And there—above the door—a final engraving she hadn't noticed before. A ring of twelve figures surrounding a thirteenth, smaller one. Each held a different symbol: a thunderbolt, a trident, a spear, a sheaf of grain.

Her throat tightened. "Marco... they're the Olympian gods."

He turned, following her gaze. "You're saying the Romans built a vault to the gods?"

"No." Her voice was barely a whisper. "They built a vault to contain them."

She thought of the myths—of Jupiter's endless affairs, of Juno's jealous vengeance, of Neptune's tempests and Pluto's gloom. Rome had never truly trusted its gods. They had worshipped them, feared them—but also suspected them of envy and spite.

The shadows shifted again. Footsteps, closer now.

Marco hissed, "Whatever we're going to do, do it fast."

Evelyn's eyes flicked across the figures, searching for a clue. In the center of the panel—the thirteenth figure—stood a child with a caduceus in his hand: Mercury. Messenger of the gods, patron of travelers and thieves.

The key is wisdom.

She stepped forward, pressing her palm against Mercury's carved face.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then—*click*.

Gears groaned deep within the stone. The engraving rotated under her hand, aligning Mercury with Jupiter, then Neptune, then Mars. As each alignment locked, a different panel on the vault began to glow.

Evelyn's pulse thundered in her ears. "It's a sequence—like a combination lock."

She strained to remember the myths. Jupiter was king of the gods—he must come first. Neptune, god of the sea, ruled the next dominion. Mars—the god of war—was ever close to the throne.

She rotated the disk again—Jupiter, Neptune, Mars.

A deeper rumble vibrated under their feet.

The vault door shuddered. The shadows behind them froze.

Marco turned, weapon raised. "They know."

Evelyn forced herself to focus. The last step—the final figure. Mercury's caduceus pointed not to war or dominion, but to knowledge.

Wisdom.

She aligned Mercury with Minerva—goddess of strategy, invention, and wisdom.

The rumble built to a deafening crescendo. Gears shifted behind the walls. The bronze door split down the center with a long, tearing shriek.

"Get in!" she shouted.

As they shoved the door open, the shadows surged forward. Figures in black rushed across the threshold, weapons raised. Marco fired a warning shot, the report exploding through the cavern. The iron soldiers stirred, but did not intervene.

Evelyn lunged inside the vault. Marco followed, gasping. Together, they heaved against the bronze slabs. The door sealed shut just as fists pounded the other side.

The cavern fell silent.

Evelyn collapsed to her knees, trembling. Marco braced himself against the wall, breathing raggedly.

“Tell me,” he panted, “that was worth it.”

She looked up—and her breath caught.

The vault’s interior was nothing like she had imagined. It wasn’t a treasury. It wasn’t a chamber of scrolls or golden relics.

It was a mausoleum.

Hundreds of sarcophagi lined the chamber, stacked in orderly rows. Each was the size of a man, forged of some dull, metallic alloy she couldn’t identify. A faint, phosphorescent mist curled around their bases like smoke.

Marco swallowed hard. “What is this?”

Evelyn stepped closer to the nearest sarcophagus. The lid was engraved in Latin:

Hic dormit Iovis.
(*Here sleeps Jupiter.*)

She staggered back.

“Marco... these aren’t just coffins.”

She turned to look down the endless rows of sarcophagi. Each bore a different name:

Neptunus.

Mars.

Venus.

Minerva.

Diana.

Apollo.

Even the smaller ones bore names she recognized—*Cupid, Proserpina, Hercules, Bacchus.*

“They’re the gods,” she whispered. “The Romans didn’t just fear them. They imprisoned them.”

Marco’s face went pale. “That’s insane.”

Evelyn shook her head, her voice hoarse. “Think about it—Rome was built on conquest. But the gods were unpredictable, dangerous. Myths talk about them fighting each other, fighting mortals. Even the earliest historians recorded stories of the gods intervening in wars—destroying entire legions, sinking fleets.”

She pointed at the sarcophagus labeled *Mars*.

“The First Punic War—when storms destroyed the Roman navy? The Senate blamed Neptune’s wrath.”

Her hand drifted to the smaller coffin inscribed *Cupid*.

“The civil wars between Caesar and Pompey? They believed Venus had turned against them.”

Marco rubbed his temples. “You’re saying Rome fought its own gods.”

Evelyn exhaled shakily. “Yes. And when they couldn’t kill them, they sealed them here.”

A cold certainty settled in her gut. Hadrian hadn’t buried Aurra Terra for its inventions alone. He had buried it because it had become a prison.

A dull thump echoed behind them—someone pounding on the sealed vault door.

Marco tensed. “We have to move.”

Evelyn’s gaze locked on the sarcophagus of Jupiter. “The myths said only mortals could betray the gods. Only mortals could imprison them.”

Her fingers hovered over the seam of the lid. “And only mortals can set them free.”

Marco stepped forward. “Wait—”

But it was too late.

Evelyn pressed her hand to the engraved lightning bolt.

The sarcophagus hissed. Ancient locks clicked open. A gust of air burst from within, stirring the phosphorescent mist into a swirling vortex.

For a heartbeat, there was silence.

Then—the lid exploded upward in a blast of golden light.

Marco threw himself over Evelyn as energy surged through the vault. The mist ignited, blinding. All around them, lids tore open. Light erupted from every sarcophagus—red, blue, silver, green.

Voices filled the chamber, overlapping, ancient and furious.

“Liberati sumus...”
(We are freed...)

The vault trembled. The air grew thick, alive with something older than Rome itself.

Evelyn lifted her head.

Figures stood among the opened sarcophagi—wreathed in their respective auras.

A towering man with a thunderbolt in one hand, his eyes burning like suns.

A woman in flowing white, her expression cold and regal—Juno.

A muscular figure clad in bronze armor, sword raised—Mars.

A beautiful woman with a myrtle wreath—Venus.

Neptune, with sea spray curling around his trident.

Minerva, wearing a helm that glowed with silver flame.

Apollo, golden and radiant.

Diana, her eyes as sharp as an arrow.

Pluto, his gaze a bottomless pit.

Vesta, Mercury, Bacchus, Ceres—dozens more.

Even the child gods stood among them—Proserpina, Cupid, Hercules, Liber.

All their eyes turned to Evelyn.

Jupiter's voice boomed across the chamber, shaking the stone itself.

"You dare awaken us?"

Evelyn's mouth was dry. "You were imprisoned."

Mars' voice was iron. "And for good reason. Your kind feared us. You feared what we could do."

Neptune stepped forward, trident lowering toward her. "Your empire betrayed its gods."

She met his gaze, her voice steady. "And you betrayed them."

Juno's eyes blazed. "Rome could not be trusted."

Minerva's voice cut through the clamor, cold and precise. "Neither could we."

Silence fell. For an instant, the ancient divide between mortal and immortal became clear.

Wars between Rome and the gods—recorded in lost scrolls, whispered in forbidden cults. Battles no historian dared transcribe in full. The burning of temples. The cursing of legions. The rise of emperors who claimed divinity to protect themselves.

Hadrian had not simply conquered Aurra Terra. He had buried a war.

And now—Evelyn had unleashed it.

Marco's hand found hers. His voice was hoarse. "What have we done?"

Jupiter's gaze swept over the chamber. His voice was low, terrible, final.

"You have broken the seals. The pact is ended. Rome's betrayal is not forgotten."

Evelyn swallowed. "The world has changed."

Venus tilted her head. "So have we."

The gods moved as one—toward the sealed vault door. Toward the world that had forgotten them.

Evelyn's heart pounded. They had found the truth.

And set it free.

The air inside the vault was thick with an ancient power, the echoes of millennia-old grudges vibrating through the very stones beneath Evelyn's feet. The gods—no longer confined to mere stories or faded inscriptions—stood before them, vast and terrible, their presence filling the chamber with a gravity that made every breath feel like it might shatter her ribs. Jupiter's eyes burned like molten gold as he surveyed the scene, and his voice reverberated with the undeniable authority of a ruler whose reign had been severed by betrayal and time. "You have broken the sacred seals, mortal. Rome's covenant with us has been shattered. What you have unleashed may yet consume the world."

Evelyn swallowed, gripping Marco's hand tightly. She could feel the weight of his fear, the palpable disbelief that the myths whispered through the ages were not only true but had endured in a hidden tomb beneath a lost city. The tension between the gods was almost palpable—Juno's regal disdain, Mars' barely restrained fury, and Neptune's brooding silence painted a picture of a divine family fractured by centuries of conflict and distrust. These gods were not the benevolent protectors of Roman tradition but entities embittered by confinement and abandonment. Their wrath was a living thing, a warning of the price Rome had paid for ambition and fear.

The story of Aurra Terra—the lost city—was no longer just a tale of forgotten technology or suppressed knowledge. It was the epicenter of a war between mortals and immortals, a war written into the very foundations of Roman history and myth. Evelyn's mind raced back to the

earliest Roman chronicles—Livy, Tacitus, Ovid—where veiled references hinted at divine intervention and divine punishment. The sacred myths, long dismissed as allegory, now unfolded with brutal clarity. The war between the Roman people and their gods had been real and catastrophic. The gods, once worshipped and feared as protectors and punishers, had turned against the empire they had helped build. Civil wars, natural disasters, and inexplicable plagues were not mere chance but the gods' relentless vengeance for their imprisonment.

As Jupiter's gaze swept over the assembled mortals, he gestured to the sarcophagi around the chamber. "We were deemed untrustworthy. Our power too great, our will too wild. The Senate feared what we might unleash upon their fledgling empire. So they cast us down, imprisoned us here beneath Aurra Terra, hiding us from the world we once ruled." His voice lowered to a growl, "But now, the chains are broken."

Evelyn stepped forward, drawing on everything she had learned from the histories and the myths to hold the conversation that could determine their fate. "You speak of betrayal, but the gods' wars among themselves tore Rome apart just as much as any mortal enemy. Juno's jealousy, Mars' thirst for blood, and Pluto's hunger for the underworld spilled into the mortal realm. The conflicts weren't only between gods and men, but between gods and gods." She paused, noting the flicker of recognition in Minerva's steely eyes. "The Senate's decision was born from fear—fear of a power that no mortal could control."

A smile—bitter and cold—crossed Venus's face as she stepped forward. "And yet Rome flourished despite it. Conquest after conquest, the empire grew. But at what cost? The gods were kept as relics, their stories twisted to fit the rulers' narratives. The children gods—Cupid, Proserpina, Hercules—were erased or forgotten, their true power and purpose denied. We were locked away, denied the worship that sustained us, made into legends instead of living forces."

Marco looked at the figures, awe mingling with dread. "So all those stories—the wars, the famines, the plagues—they were real battles and punishments from you?"

Neptune's voice rumbled like a storm. "Yes. When Rome's legions marched, so too did our tempests and earthquakes. The empire's triumph was stained with divine wrath. The destruction of Carthage, the burning of temples in Rome itself—these were the echoes of a family torn apart by pride and vengeance."

Evelyn's heart pounded as she realized the enormity of their situation. The gods were not simply beings of myth; they were forces of nature bound by ancient grudges, and now that they were free, the fragile balance that had maintained the world for centuries was shattered. She remembered reading how Emperor Augustus had attempted to restore order by rebuilding temples and reviving old rituals, trying to appease a pantheon growing restless and unpredictable. But those efforts were merely stopgaps—temporary measures to delay a reckoning that was inevitable.

Pluto, lord of the underworld, stepped forward, his eyes shadowed and deep. "Even among us, the wars did not end. The cycles of betrayal and bloodshed continued—Persephone stolen from

the earth, Bacchus torn between madness and revelry, Vesta's sacred flame flickering against the darkness. The gods' domain was fractured, a reflection of the mortal world's chaos."

The chamber fell into a heavy silence, the weight of millennia pressing down. Evelyn knew their next move would define everything—whether they could bridge the gulf between divine fury and human survival, or if the ancient war would consume them all. She glanced at Marco, whose steady presence grounded her amidst the storm of gods and history. Together, they faced the dawn of a new era—one where myth and reality collided, and the forgotten gods walked again.

The gods' voices lingered in the air like thunder, heavy with centuries of betrayal and fury. It became clear that their wrath had not been a mere myth or poetic exaggeration, but a tangible force that shaped the very course of Roman history. Jupiter, the king of gods, recounted how the divine discontent manifested in waves of disasters that befell the empire, often interpreted by mortal historians as acts of fate or omens. But these were acts of rebellion—punishments delivered when the gods felt their power and place were being usurped.

"Recall the great fire of Rome under Nero," Jupiter's voice rumbled, "a conflagration that reduced the city to ashes. What was said of chance or carelessness was but the expression of our fury, a response to Rome's neglect. The Senate's refusal to honor us, the profaning of sacred sites, the corruption of priests—it all led to the flames." His eyes narrowed as he regarded Evelyn and Marco. "The people worshipped statues and rituals but denied the living power behind them."

Juno, queen of gods, spoke with regal bitterness about the sacred festivals abandoned or altered. "The Vestal Virgins, once revered guardians of Rome's hearth, were degraded into mere ceremonial shadows. The rites honoring Vesta were stripped of meaning, and the flame that sustained Rome's soul flickered dangerously. With each act of disrespect, our patience wore thin."

The gods' distrust toward the mortal rulers was mirrored by a growing mistrust from Rome itself. Evelyn recalled from her readings how the Roman Senate increasingly distanced itself from the old pantheon, embracing instead the burgeoning influence of imperial cults that deified emperors—men who wielded mortal power but claimed divine favor. This shift sowed deep divisions. The gods were sidelined, deemed capricious and unreliable, their legends rewritten as myths to placate a population that feared divine wrath but no longer believed in divine justice.

Mars, the god of war, spoke grimly about the legions' campaigns. "The empire's endless wars were as much a punishment for you as they were for your enemies. We withdrew our favor when Rome sought conquest without honor. The bloody fields of Gaul, the deserts of Egypt, the mist-shrouded forests of Germania—each bore the mark of our judgment. The Legio IX Hispana vanished not by chance but because it defied our will."

Neptune's voice, deep and stormy, reminded them of the sea's fury unleashed upon Roman vessels and coastal cities alike. "The Tiber ran red not only with mortal blood but with the turmoil

of the gods. Storms wrecked fleets, floods drowned the innocent. The empire's arrogance invited our wrath, and the oceans took what was theirs."

The gods revealed how the great civil wars that tore Rome apart—the struggles between Julius Caesar and Pompey, Octavian and Mark Antony—were not merely political but had divine underpinnings. "Each faction was backed by different deities, their rivalries spilling over into mortal affairs. Discord sowed among gods—Venus and Juno clashing, Apollo and Diana competing for favor—became reflected in the blood-soaked streets of the city."

Evelyn's mind reeled with the significance. The gods' withdrawal and punishment were intertwined with Rome's rise and fall, with every emperor's reign shadowed by divine favor or curse. Augustus's attempts to restore traditional worship were desperate measures to stem the tide of divine abandonment, but by then, the fracture was too deep. Rome feared the gods as much as it once revered them, casting them into the shadows—literal and metaphorical.

She glanced at the restless figures around her. The gods were no longer figures of benevolence but ancient prisoners, their fury a testament to the empire's betrayal. The knowledge they guarded—the secret power of Aurra Terra—was both a blessing and a curse. A power Rome had feared and buried to protect itself from divine judgment and the chaos that such forces could unleash.

As the gods' stories filled the chamber, Evelyn understood that their imprisonment was both punishment and protection—a way to contain a force too wild for mortals to wield, yet too potent to ignore. The mistrust between gods and empire was the tragic legacy of an age where power, faith, and fear collided with devastating consequences.

And now, with the seals broken and the ancient city uncovered, the war between the divine and mortal realms was no longer confined to myth or history. It was poised to erupt once more.

Evelyn had always believed that history was a matter of records—dates, artifacts, inscriptions etched into stone. But as the gods' voices thundered through the vault, she realized that history was alive. It was standing before them, breathing, seething, reclaiming the world that had abandoned it. The air itself seemed to warp as the gods stepped forward, their forms shifting between radiant splendor and shadowed rage. A golden haze began to rise around the chamber, thickening until she could barely see Marco's silhouette. Every instinct screamed that they should never have come here, never have pried open the past.

Mars's voice carried above the growing din, edged with grim satisfaction. "We are no longer content to watch your world desecrate our memory. You have chosen to uncover what was buried—now you will witness what was lost." His eyes burned, flickering between fire and polished bronze.

Around them, the machinery embedded in the walls began to hum. Gears ancient beyond reckoning spun to life. Symbols Evelyn had only ever seen in half-erased texts glowed with a cold blue radiance. She felt the hair lift on her arms as the floor trembled beneath her boots.

Marco turned, desperation on his face, but he didn't have to speak. She understood the truth as plainly as if it were etched into her skin: they were no longer in control.

Jupiter raised his hand, and a crack of blinding lightning split the air, striking the ceiling. Chunks of ancient masonry tumbled around them, yet none struck the gods. The thunderclap reverberated like the roar of a thousand legions. "Rome forgot who made it great. Rome forgot who gave it power," Jupiter proclaimed. "The age of mortals is a failed experiment. You will return to the time before their arrogance."

Evelyn's vision blurred. The edges of reality itself were fraying. The golden haze grew thicker, shifting with images she could hardly process: glimpses of marble temples pristine and unruined, of galleys cutting through the Mediterranean, of legions marching beneath standards that gleamed unbroken in the sun. Her stomach lurched as the air grew impossibly dense, pressing against her chest as if she were sinking underwater.

She felt Marco's hand close around her wrist. His voice was raw, torn between fear and fury. "Evelyn—look!"

The world tilted. The vault, the automatons, the flickering phosphorescent murals—all dissolved into a rushing whirlwind of visions. They were falling, though her feet never left the floor. The chamber blurred into a storm of color and memory. In an instant, she understood: the gods were not merely reclaiming their freedom. They were dragging the world backward, into the age when their rule was absolute.

Time itself was reversing.

In that instant, she saw the story as if it were unfolding before her eyes. She saw the dawn of Rome's mythic past—the flight of Aeneas from burning Troy, the storm conjured by Juno to drown him, the moment Venus interceded to save him. She saw Romulus and Remus suckling the she-wolf, their eyes bright with the promise of empire. She saw the Sabine women carried off by Roman warriors, an act of brutality recast as destiny. The visions raced past her, each more vivid and consuming than the last.

Marco's voice reached her as a ragged whisper. "They're... they're pulling everything back. This is the Aeneid. The foundation myths... they're becoming real."

The truth struck her like a blow. This was why Aurra Terra had been buried, why the Romans had conspired to erase it. Not just because of the automatons or the knowledge that could upend the world—but because the gods themselves were a force no mortal power could contain. They were not content to remain as memory. They would remake the world in their image again and again if allowed.

The floor vanished beneath her. For a heartbeat she felt weightless. Then she slammed down hard onto cool, dew-wet grass. Gasping, she blinked against golden dawn light. She was no longer in the cavern.

She was on the Palatine Hill—but not as she had known it. All around her, new marble walls rose in perfect, gleaming lines. Columns stood unweathered by time. From the Tiber below, the cries of thousands drifted up—legions assembling, priests chanting over fresh altars. The Forum was a construction site of cranes and scaffolds, alive with the sounds of an empire just being born.

And above them all, the gods loomed.

Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Neptune stood on the heights as they had in every mosaic, but no longer as silent figures of legend. They were here—watching, assessing, remembering their power. Venus lifted her gaze to the rising sun, her voice as soft and cold as starlight. “You sought the truth of Aurra Terra. Now you will dwell within it.”

Evelyn staggered to her feet. Her mind rebelled at the impossibility. She could feel the past around her, taste the ash and earth of Rome’s earliest days. Marco stood beside her, wide-eyed, the pistol still clutched uselessly in his hand.

“We have to get out of here,” he rasped.

“There is no out,” she whispered. “They’re pulling us into their age. This was never about knowledge—it was about control.”

As the dawn brightened, she realized how foolish she had been to think uncovering Aurra Terra would ever be safe. The Romans had not sealed this city only to protect their empire—they had done it to protect the future itself. To keep the gods locked away from a world that had learned to survive without them.

Now, as time itself unwound and the gods prepared to reclaim their dominion, Evelyn felt the weight of every choice she had made. History was no longer something to study. It was a prison—and she and Marco were locked inside it with the most dangerous beings the human imagination had ever conjured.

And in their eyes, there was no distinction between myth and truth, reverence and rebellion. There was only the certainty that mortals had overstepped their place—and the time had come to set the world right.

CHAPTER 3

Evelyn opened her eyes to dawn spilling over an unfamiliar sky, but no part of her questioned it. The marble pillars around her glowed with the gold of morning light, casting long shadows across a courtyard paved in geometric mosaics. She could smell crushed laurel leaves and the smoke of altar fires drifting on the breeze. Somewhere beyond the walls, the river Tiber flowed, carrying the chants of priests and the clamor of soldiers drilling in ranks.

She did not wonder where she was. She did not wonder who she was.

Because she had never been anyone else.

Her name was Aelia Valeria. She was the scribe of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, a duty her mother had held before her, and her grandmother before that. Each morning, she recorded the decrees the gods gave to mortals—the tributes demanded, the punishments decreed. It was the life she had always known.

Beside her, Marcus Silvanus—her sworn protector, a centurion in service to Mars—adjusted the weight of his armor. The iron segments were familiar against his shoulders, just as the ceremonial gladius at his hip was as much a part of him as his own hands. He did not recall any other uniform. He did not recall another name.

If you had asked either of them whether there had ever been a life beyond this one—a world of buried cities, of iron automatons locked in vaults beneath Rome—they would have looked at you with blank confusion. Because to them, nothing had ever existed beyond this.

It was the age of heroes and gods, the time sung in the verses of the Aeneid. Aelia knew, without needing to be told, that they lived in the reign of King Latinus, when Aeneas himself walked the earth. The Trojan exiles had settled among the Latins, forging the alliances that would one day become Rome. And in this dawn of history, the gods did not hide in temples or statues. They ruled in the open, their voices the final law.

Jupiter sat enthroned above the Capitoline, watching the mortal world unfold below his gaze. When he spoke, no man or woman dared disobey. When Venus passed through the Forum, even the senators dropped to their knees, for she was the mother of Aeneas, the living ancestress of Rome. Neptune's trident was raised over the ports, and Mars's red-crested helm gleamed behind every legionary banner.

Aelia had no desire to flee this world. Why would she? She had been born to serve. It was her honor to inscribe the will of the gods into record tablets. Each time she touched her stylus to the wax, she felt the certainty of her purpose.

Marcus likewise felt no longing for another life. He was a soldier of Mars, consecrated in blood and iron. He knew nothing of modern pistols or archaeological digs. He knew only the discipline of the march, the weight of a scutum in his hand, the thrill of battle under the eyes of divine patrons.

They were slaves, yes—but slaves who believed themselves free. Because they could not remember ever being anything else.

At sunrise, they stood together on the temple steps, watching the daily sacrifices laid before Jupiter's altar. Four white bulls, their flanks dusted with sacred meal, lowed in the cool air as priests read the auguries. Smoke drifted upward into a sky impossibly blue, unsullied by the centuries of empire that would one day follow.

Aelia glanced at Marcus and smiled faintly, the expression warm and habitual. She knew nothing of a cavern called Aurra Terra or the fatal curiosity that had once driven her to seek it. She did not recall the sealed vault or the golden map. She did not remember Rome's future—only its mythic beginning, the one she now inhabited as if it had always been her fate.

Far below, in the valley where the huts of the Latins clustered among orchards and vineyards, the people bent their heads as Venus passed, trailing her silken veil over the earth she claimed as her own. Mars followed her, his armored stride ringing like a funeral march. Aeneas himself stood before them, bearing his shield emblazoned with the destinies of his descendants—Romulus and Remus, Caesar, Augustus.

This was the age the gods had longed to reclaim. The dawn before mortals grew too clever, too ambitious, too confident in their power. An age when the gods ruled openly, their word unchallenged.

And in the minds of their servants—Aelia Valeria and Marcus Silvanus—no other life had ever existed.

The past had become their only reality.

The present had dissolved like mist.

And the future they had once belonged to had ceased to matter, as if it had never been real at all.

They lived each day as if it were the only life they had ever known, because to them, it was.

Aelia Valeria rose before dawn in the high quarters of the Temple of Jupiter, where smooth marble columns framed her view of the Capitoline Hill. She washed her face in cool spring water drawn up in clay basins and dressed in the white linen stola of a consecrated scribe. When she passed along the colonnade to the sanctuary's heart, she paused, as she did every morning, before the towering statue of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.

The god's carved gaze—stern, imperious—seemed to follow her no matter where she moved. But she felt no fear. Only the peculiar certainty that she existed for this purpose: to serve. To record his proclamations. To offer herself as any other gift laid before the altar.

The world beyond the temple walls was alive with legend. In the lower valley, King Latinus held audience with Aeneas and his Trojan captains, planning the alliances that would knit Latins and Trojans together in a single destiny. Venus, luminous and ethereal, walked among the olive groves to bless the harvest. Mercury flitted from camp to camp bearing messages no mortal ear dared overhear.

And Mars—lord of war—stood in the training fields, watching Marcus Silvanus drill with the other legionaries. Marcus's armor bore the red crest of Mars's personal cohort. Each dawn, he knelt in ritual devotion before the god who had claimed him as a soldier. He could not have imagined that he had once borne a firearm, that he had fought for his life in subterranean vaults. All of that knowledge had been burned away like so much chaff in the fires of time.

The days blurred into a litany of sacred tasks and oracles. But in the evenings, after the sacrifices were complete and the last of the acolytes had withdrawn, Aelia was often summoned to the inner sanctum to record the god's decrees alone.

On one such night, she entered the vaulted chamber, the polished floor reflecting torchlight in golden ripples. She knelt beside the dais where the offerings smoked in shallow braziers—incense, fresh laurel, salted flour—and pressed her forehead to the cold stone.

"My lord Jupiter," she whispered, her voice steady, "I await your command."

The air shifted. The flames bowed inward, as though a great breath had passed through the chamber. And then—he was simply there. Not a statue, not a carving, but a presence so immense her mind struggled to contain it. The scent of ozone and lightning suffused the air, mingling with the sweetness of incense.

She did not dare lift her gaze. Even so, she felt the weight of his regard.

"You are faithful," came a voice that filled the chamber to the corners. "You have been consecrated to me since your birth."

"I serve as I am commanded," she replied, because there was no other answer.

"You will serve more," he said.

Her heart fluttered. Though she did not yet understand, she did not question. This was the life she had always known: that the gods chose as they willed, that mortals were vessels for their desires and plans. Jupiter had taken many such daughters of Rome before—this was recorded in every temple chronicle. The ancients had sung of Leda, of Danaë, of Europa. She was neither the first nor the last.

She lifted her head slowly, her breath catching at the sight of him: not merely a man, but a being woven of storm and radiance. Lightning flickered through his hair as if the sky itself crowned him.

"My lord," she whispered, voice trembling, "as you command."

When she emerged from the chamber hours later, her skin tingled with the electric trace of his power. She knew, with the same unshakable certainty that defined her every day, that she carried within her a new life. A child of Jupiter.

No part of her rebelled. No part of her recalled that once she had been Evelyn, who would have fought with every breath against such a fate. That memory had been unmade.

While Aelia served the god in the temple, Marcus Silvanus lived the life of a warrior consecrated to Mars. Each day he trained among the soldiers of Aeneas, learning the tactics that would one

day form the legions. Mars himself stalked the fields in armor bright as forged blood, instructing them in spear formations and shield walls.

One evening, Marcus stood watch along the palisade of King Latinus's encampment. In the darkness beyond the torches, he saw the shadow of Venus herself moving among the tents, whispering promises to Trojan captains. He heard Mercury's laughter overhead, borne on wings that rustled like silk.

None of it surprised him. To serve the gods in this age was as natural as breath.

In the months that followed, Aelia's belly grew round. The high priestesses of the Capitoline proclaimed the child a blessing upon the city's destiny. Women came to press offerings into her hands—garlands of flowers, tiny carved amulets of Fortuna. They called her blessed, chosen.

And she believed them.

One evening, as the setting sun gilded the fields where Latins and Trojans prepared for war against the Rutulians, Aelia sat beside the great altar, her stylus poised above a wax tablet. Jupiter's latest decree spilled from her lips in a voice not entirely her own.

"Let it be recorded," she intoned, "that the gods withdrew their trust from men when ambition grew too great. Let it be known that mortals forgot the old laws and dared to place themselves above Olympus."

She did not know she was recording the reason Rome would one day turn away from its gods. That this age—so radiant in its power—would end in distrust and blood. She could not guess that centuries later, emperors would forbid the old rites and cast down the temples in anger.

To her, there was no future beyond the one she served.

As the stars brightened over the fields where the first Roman heroes marched to war, Marcus Silvanus buckled on his armor beside the other soldiers. Mars passed between their ranks, a god of war incarnate, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You will not fail," the god murmured. "You are mine."

Marcus bowed his head. "As you command."

And so they lived: in an age that had become their only reality, their only truth. The past was their present, and the will of the gods was the only law they had ever known.

There were no memories of the buried vault. No recollection of iron automatons or the sealed city called Aurra Terra.

Only the dawn of Rome, and the knowledge that they were vessels of divine will—slaves in a world of gods who did not forgive.

The birth came at the turning of the year, when the first storms of spring split the sky over Latium. Thunder rolled across the Capitoline as Aelia Valeria labored in the sacred chamber, the midwives moving like pale shadows around her. The incense was thick, the chants unbroken, but none of it could quiet the dread that had seeded itself in her mind.

For hours she struggled, clutching the ivory rails of the birthing couch. She tasted copper on her tongue and felt her mind slipping in and out of lucidity. Between the waves of pain, she glimpsed shapes that did not belong: glowing screens, a flashlight beam cutting through darkness, the silhouette of a man with a rifle slung across his chest—

Marco.

She knew his name, though she should not. The thought cut her deeper than any blade.

Then another vision burst across her mind—stone corridors lined with bronze automatons, a vault door inscribed with Latin she had once read. Aurra Terra.

Her voice broke in a strangled gasp. “No... no—”

One of the midwives leaned close. “Hold on, blessed one. The child comes.”

But Aelia was not looking at the woman. She was staring at the figure who stood just beyond the threshold—slim and golden-haired, with a bow slung across one shoulder. His gaze was not kind.

Cupid.

His pale eyes fixed on her with unsettling clarity, as if he, too, could see the flickering images in her mind. His voice was soft as falling ash.

“You remember.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Please... I don’t understand...”

“You remember what you were,” he said. “Even in this age, you are not wholly ours.”

The pain tore another scream from her throat, and then the child was born into the midwife’s waiting hands. She heard her daughter’s first thin wail, bright as a struck bell, and for an instant the visions vanished. She knew only this child—warm and real against her chest.

“Her name,” the eldest priestess prompted.

Aelia swallowed, her voice ragged but sure. “Livia Aurelia.”

The midwife smiled faintly. “A beautiful name for the daughter of the King of Gods.”

But Cupid had already slipped from the chamber, the echo of his sandals fading across the marble. She did not see the look on his face as he left—a look of troubled calculation.

That night, in the upper precinct of the Capitoline Temple, Jupiter received his son's report in silence. The torches guttered in the sudden cold.

"She remembers," Jupiter repeated at last, his voice low as a gathering storm.

Cupid nodded. "Not everything. But enough."

For a long time, the god said nothing. Then he rose, the vast shape of his presence eclipsing the chamber, and his words crackled like distant thunder.

"They would undo what was sealed. They would bury us again."

At his summons, the other immortals came. Juno with her proud, furious eyes; Mars armored and red with wrath; Venus with her mouth set in a hard, cold line. Even Mercury, ever restless, stood still as a pillar when Jupiter spoke.

"These two," Jupiter said, "have carried foreign knowledge into our time. They have glimpsed the chains our enemies forged for us. If they are permitted to remember, they will find a way to seal us once more."

Mars flexed his gauntleted hands. "Then we strike them down now."

"No," Juno interrupted sharply. "If you kill them, you only fulfill the prophecy. The child is part of it now—Livia Aurelia, daughter of the sky-father. If she lives, the cycle continues."

Venus stepped closer, her gown whispering over the marble. "Then we must bind them. All of them. Keep them where we can watch."

Jupiter's gaze burned like lightning. "They will never be permitted to unmake what we have restored."

Aelia never slept that night. She sat with Livia swaddled against her breast, rocking her slowly, while Marcus—no, Marco—paced the narrow chamber. His eyes were haunted.

"She's so perfect," he whispered. "But... I don't think she was ever meant to exist."

Aelia swallowed. "They know."

He looked up sharply. "What do you mean?"

“Cupid saw me remembering,” she said. “He told Jupiter.”

Marcus closed his eyes, bracing a hand against the wall as if the world tilted beneath him. “Then it’s over. We’re theirs.”

“No,” she said, her voice trembling but resolute. “If we remembered, even for a moment... that means the past isn’t gone. We have to find Aurra Terra again. We have to bury them.”

He stared at her, his expression sick with dread. “We’d be trying to erase the gods themselves.”

“They were sealed before,” she said, clutching Livia more tightly. “The Romans did it. They didn’t trust them anymore—not after centuries of meddling, of war, of forced unions like—” She broke off, her eyes blurring.

Marcus exhaled. “You’re right.”

Slowly, the memories were returning—like a wound that refused to close. The vault, the automatons, the inscriptions carved in Latin. *The key is wisdom.*

If they could remember, then they could act.

Aelia looked down at her sleeping child. “They will come for us soon.”

“Then we don’t wait,” Marcus said. He reached for her free hand and closed it in his. “We run. We find Aurra Terra before they can stop us.”

As dawn bled across the eastern sky, the two of them slipped out of the temple precinct, their daughter wrapped close to Aelia’s chest. The streets were still, the city unprepared for the heresy they were about to commit.

In the shadows behind them, Mercury lifted a silver torch, signaling the others.

Jupiter’s voice rumbled across the hills, too soft for any but the immortals to hear:

“No more forgetting.”

And for the first time in centuries, the gods prepared for war with mortals who would not be bound.

They did not flee the city in daylight. Instead, Marcus and Aelia waited until the last of the torches burned low along the Forum Romanum, until the praetorian patrols were recalled to their barracks. Livia slept quietly in Aelia’s arms, her tiny face serene in the torchlit gloom. But every step Marcus took felt like trespass—like he was placing his foot on the throat of an empire that would crush him if it woke.

They moved past the Temple of Castor and Pollux, its columns shining white under a waning moon. Once, this place had been the very heart of Roman power, where senators gathered to

trade ambition for blood and glory. Aelia's gaze lifted to the statues above the portico—the Dioscuri, twin sons of Jupiter, their marble faces unyielding.

Once, they were mortal too, she thought. Until their father claimed them.

And suddenly she remembered something else: the myth of Romulus, who struck down his own brother to found a city that would one day attempt to master the gods themselves. She remembered reading those lines, not in a temple scroll, but in a book—bound in cracked leather, smudged with her own fingerprints. *Livy's Ab urbe condita*. The story had once been just that: a story. Now, she walked in it.

Beside her, Marcus swallowed hard. "You feel it too," he whispered.

"Yes," she murmured. "It's all... bleeding together."

When they reached the edge of the Velabrum, a low fog drifted between the warehouses and shrines. Aelia paused, clutching Livia to her heart, and stared at the Arch of Janus rising in the mist. It was Janus who presided over beginnings and endings, doors that opened and closed—and perhaps, she thought, over time itself. In his two faces, she saw the past they were losing and the future they were risking. She touched the cold travertine, and for a moment, she thought she saw him watching her.

"Which path do you guard?" she whispered to the statue.

But no answer came—only the hush of night.

They turned south, toward the Appian Way, where the road of conquest began. Here, centuries of legions had marched out to build the empire, to fight Carthage and Gaul, to bring glory home in golden triumphs. But the road was older still, older even than Rome's claim to destiny. And somewhere along its length, hidden beneath the paving stones and the miles of tombs, was a place the Romans themselves had buried: *Aurra Terra*.

Aelia closed her eyes, remembering the words carved into that golden map. *Aurra Terra, urbs umbrarum*. The city of shadows. And she remembered the inscription she had traced with trembling fingers: *Per iuramentum meum, Aurra Terra deleatur*. By my oath, *Aurra Terra* shall be destroyed. Hadrian himself had ordered it, just as Augustus once declared Apollo to be his patron, just as the Sibylline Books were hidden in the temple vaults when their prophecies proved too dangerous.

And here she was, centuries before the birth of Hadrian or Augustus—living in the world that had made the myths, the same world that would one day fear them enough to erase them.

Marcus touched her shoulder. "We can't stay here. The gods will be searching."

She looked up. "Then we follow the only trail we have."

They took shelter for the day in a villa that had been abandoned since Sulla's purges. Columns lay shattered in the courtyard, and mosaic floors had been lifted by tree roots. Aelia pressed Livia to her breast as she tried to sleep, but every time her eyes closed, she saw Jupiter's face.

She remembered the old tales of his punishments—how he chained Prometheus to a rock for giving fire to men, how he struck down Phaethon for daring to steer the chariot of the sun. She thought of how he had come to her, not as lightning and thunder, but as a man who made promises she hadn't believed she could refuse. And still, she felt a terrible guilt: the child was innocent, no matter how she had been conceived.

When dawn came, Marcus sat beside her, arms braced on his knees. He did not look at her when he spoke.

"There's an old story," he said quietly. "From the Second Punic War. After Hannibal crossed the Alps, the Romans made a secret vow. If they survived, they would bury everything that had led them to near ruin—the statues, the prophecies, the cults. They sealed them in vaults beneath the Capitoline. It was a warning. That Rome could fear its own gods."

Aelia nodded. "And yet, centuries later, it happened again."

"Over and over," Marcus murmured. "They worshipped them. They built temples. But in the end... they never trusted them."

She closed her eyes. "Because they knew."

"That the gods would never be content to rule the heavens alone," he finished.

They fell silent as Livia began to stir, her tiny hands batting the air. Aelia cradled her daughter close, her heart aching. Somewhere in the fog of memory and myth, she knew this child was part of the pattern—proof that the gods had always intended to bind mortals to them, whether by worship or by blood.

But it was not the life she wanted for her daughter.

That night, as they prepared to leave, they heard footsteps outside the villa. Marcus pressed himself to the crumbling wall, hand on the dagger he had taken from the armory. Aelia held her breath as shadows moved across the colonnade.

And then Mercury stepped into view.

His traveler's cloak fluttered around his ankles, and the caduceus gleamed in his hand. His eyes, bright as polished bronze, fixed on Aelia's.

"You cannot run forever," he said softly.

Aelia's heart thumped so hard she thought it might burst. "We don't have to," she whispered. "We only need to run long enough."

“Long enough for what?” Mercury tilted his head, curiosity flickering across his boyish face.

She swallowed. “To find the place where Rome hid you. The place where Rome ended you.”

Mercury’s expression did not change, but for an instant she thought she glimpsed something in his gaze—pity, or perhaps a weary respect. “You think you can repeat history,” he murmured. “That you can bind gods as your ancestors did.”

“We don’t think,” Marcus said from the shadows. “We know.”

Mercury’s smile was sad. “Then run, mortals. Run to your doom.”

He vanished, like a candle snuffed in the wind.

When silence returned, Aelia raised her eyes to Marcus. For the first time, she saw him as more than a slave to memory or fate. He was her companion, her shield, the only tether she had to a life she was no longer sure had been real.

“We have to be ready,” she whispered.

“We will be,” Marcus said. He reached for her hand and clasped it hard. “We’ll find Aurra Terra.”

And in that ruined villa, with the city asleep behind them and the child of a god in their arms, they vowed that Rome’s ancient dread would not be in vain.

To be continued...

